

**Civil Rights and the Cold War At Home:  
Postwar Activism, Anticommunism,  
and the Decline of the Left**

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Over the past generation, a consensus has emerged on the subject of Cold War domestic anticommunism and civil rights: the former was bad for the latter. The “impact of the Cold War, the anti-communist purges and near-totalitarian social environment” of the late 1940s, Manning Marable asserted back in 1984, “had a devastating effect upon the cause of blacks’ civil rights and civil liberties.” The “paranoid mood of anti-communist America made it difficult for any other reasonable reform movement to exist.”<sup>1</sup> But for the deleterious effects of Cold War anticommunism, the influential sociologist suggested, the “democratic upsurge of black people which characterized the late 1950s could have happened ten years earlier.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, many scholars now insist, *contra* Marable, that such an earlier upsurge did take place. In the decade or two before the *Brown* decision (1954) and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56), they argue, a dynamic alliance of left-wing trade unionists, civil rights activists, and members of the Communist Party (CP)

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<sup>1</sup> Manning Marable, Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 18; Peter B. Levy, “Painting the Black Freedom Struggle Red: Southern Anticommunism and the Civil Rights Struggle,” in Lori Lyn Bogle, ed., The Cold War. Volume 5: Cold War Culture and Society (New York: Routledge, 2001), 122-26, 133. An alternative approach, most notably advanced by legal historian Mary Dudziak, has emphasized how the Cold War abroad created political openings for civil rights proponents in the United States. America’s racial problem rendered the United States vulnerable in its struggle with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of the decolonized world, they insisted; only civil rights progress would advance the U.S. interest in the Cold War in the Third World. See Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); John Skrentny, The Minority Rights Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002); Thomas Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). To those historians who suggest that the success of the civil rights movement of the 1950s was “as at least in part a product of the Cold War,” Jacqueline Dowd Hall counters that “[s]een through the optic of the long civil rights movement. . . civil rights look less like a product of the Cold War and more like a casualty.” Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” The Journal of American History 91, No. 4 (March 2005): 1249.

<sup>2</sup> Marable, Race, Reform and Rebellion, 17.

were at the heart of what they term “the long civil rights movement.”<sup>3</sup> Repression in Cold War America, however, did it in. Unions purged their left wing, civil rights groups ousted Communist members, and liberals spurned alliances with their former allies on the Communist left and instead crusaded against them. The federal government, through loyalty oaths, infiltration, selective prosecution, and assorted repressive tactics, hounded Communists and their supporters, depriving them of passports, employment, and credibility. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, what had appeared as a promising radical movement committed to overturning Jim Crow, pursuing economic egalitarianism, and supporting anticolonial movements abroad was effectively dead.

For at least two decades, leading scholars of the long civil rights movement have highlighted the consequences of Cold War anticommunism’s triumph over radicalism. The following is now conventional wisdom: Anticommunist persecution undermined civil rights by labeling them “subversive.”<sup>4</sup> The “Red Scare unleashed by the cold war undercut civil rights activism and progress by insisting that such efforts threatened American unity and were communist-supported and inspired,” Duke Ellington’s recent biographer explains.<sup>5</sup> “McCarthyism and Cold War liberalism,” Martha Biondi asserts, “shut the door on more thoroughgoing critiques of American society.”<sup>6</sup> The Cold War and “welling anticommunism” of mainstream black organizations, activists, and “public opinion leaders,” Thomas Sugrue maintains, “would squeeze black radicalism to the margins,” with “profound implications” for the movement in the 1960s and beyond.<sup>7</sup> “The embrace of the Truman Doctrine by many African American leaders,” Penny Von Eschen contends, “fundamentally altered the terms of anticolonialism” as those leaders “abandoned criticism of foreign policy in favor of the dominant argument that racial inequality at home should be opposed because it undermined the legitimate global goals of the United States.”<sup>8</sup> On the labor front, the “broad social vision” of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was “narrowed,” David M. Lewis-Coleman argues, as

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<sup>3</sup> The classic formulation is Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” 1233-1263.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Janken, White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP (New York: New Press, 2003), 308.

<sup>5</sup> Harvey G. Cohen, Duke Ellington’s America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 251.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Biondi, “How New York Changes the Story of the Civil Rights Movement,” Afro-Americans in New York Life and History 31, No. 2 (July 2007): 17.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (New York: Random House, 2008), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Penny Von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 97. Shana Bernstein endorses this argument, concluding that “During the Cold War, adopting anticommunism largely severed the struggle for civil rights at home from critiques of racism and colonialism abroad,” with “domestic equality activists” submerging “their earlier foreign policy criticisms of the United States and its allies.” Shana Bernstein, Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121. An early expression of this view is found in James L. Roark, “American Black Leaders: The Response to Colonialism and the Cold War, 1943-1953,” African Historical Studies 4, No. 2 (1971): 253-270. Also see Brenda Gayle Plummer, Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 188.

the industrial union federation “distanced itself from civil rights issues” and purged those unions whose Communist leaders had been “in the forefront of the labor-based struggle for racial equality.”<sup>9</sup> Intellectual life too was impoverished, for class vanished from Americans’ political vocabulary. In Ellen Schrecker’s rendering, McCarthyism succeeded in “banish[ing] economic inequality and the plight of African Americans from the nation’s cultural discourse.”<sup>10</sup> Marable’s assertions that anticommunism was “a destructive force within civil rights groups, and, more broadly, within the black community” and that the “terrible human costs of McCarthyism, the destroyed careers and private lives, all contributed to delay and retard the democratic impulse toward desegregation and racial equality” are commonly shared amongst civil rights historians today.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David M. Lewis-Coleman, “From Fellow Traveler to Friendly Witness: Shelton Tapes, Liberal Anticommunism, and Working-Class Civil Rights in the United Auto Workers,” in Shelton Stromquist, ed., Labor’s Cold War: Local Politics in a Global Context (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 111, 113. Also see Scott Kurashige, The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5, 209.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Schrecker, “Foreword,” in Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, eds., Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: “Another Side of the Story” (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xiv; Ellen Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 396, 398-99, 401. A “case can be made that the anticommunist crusade. . . deflected the civil rights movement from pressing for economic, as well as legal and political, change,” Schrecker argues. “McCarthyism eliminated options and narrowed the struggle for black equality.” Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes, 389-390. Even Manfred Berg, a scholar more sympathetic to Cold War liberalism, has concluded that “anticommunist hysteria. . . put tremendous pressure on the civil rights movement. As a consequence, unity was destroyed and its radical left wing fell victim to the witch-hunts of the red scare.” Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,” Journal of American History 94, No. 1 (June 2007): 76.

<sup>11</sup> Manning Marable, “Series Editors’ Foreword,” in Lieberman and Lang, eds., Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement, x, xi. Scholars of race, radicalism, and civil rights who emphasize the left-wing orientation of a “long civil rights movement” are indebted to the “Opportunities Found and Lost” thesis, first formulated in 1988 by Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad. That complex thesis posited that the “civil rights era began, dramatically and decisively, in the early 1940s.” Black migration had produced a growing black proletariat that enlisted in the NAACP and the CIO in vast numbers. The movement’s “dynamic character” owed much to the relationship between “unionized blacks and the federal government,” for New Deal labor legislation – namely, the National Labor Relations Act – and the subsequent wartime Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) – afforded black workers a “political standard by which they could legitimate their demands and stimulate a popular struggle.” The result was a “rights consciousness that gave black militancy a [powerful] moral justification.” The case studies offered in the essay highlighted two Communist-led or influenced union locals which engaged in popular grassroots mobilization, addressed workplace and community issues, and articulated a critique more radical than that of mainstream civil rights leaders, before and after the 1940s. As the essay shows, the opportunities generated by the confluence of forces in the war years were short lived, however; by the late 1940s and early 1950s, the workplace-oriented movement succumbed to a combination of anticommunism, anti-unionism, mechanization, the Taft-Hartley Act, intra-CIO conflicts, and the Communist Party’s own missteps. Although Korstad and Lichtenstein included both Communists and non-Communists in the 1940s movement and attributed its decline to multiple factors, much of the subsequent scholarship has disproportionately centered on a left-labor-civil rights alliance that owed its strength to the Communist party and its sympathizers. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” Journal of American History 75, No. 3 (December 1988): 801-804.

The new consensus on the domestic Cold War and civil rights leaves no question as to the consequences of the demise of the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition for black equality: For Nancy MacLean, anticommunism's "toll was ruinous. . . This menacing climate yielded a weaker and more cautious civil rights movement in the early 1950s, one fearful of direct action, mass politics, or economic demands."<sup>12</sup> In David Lewis-Coleman's view, the liberal proponents of civil rights who survived the anticommunist repression "lacked the capacity for grassroots mobilization and militancy required to eliminate racism."<sup>13</sup> Thomas Sugrue contends that the "Red Scare drove activists away from strategies of protest and confrontation to those of conciliation and persuasion."<sup>14</sup> The "narrowing of public discourse in the early Cold War era," Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein conclude, "contributed largely to the defeat and diffusion of that movement. The rise of anticommunism shattered the Popular Front coalition on civil rights."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the new movement that emerged in the mid-1950s supposedly lacked its predecessor's political critique linking class and race oppression. Whereas the earlier movement possessed a powerful anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist dimension, the new movement concerned itself with a narrower definition of civil rights. As Korstad recently put it, the "disintegration of the movements of the Popular Front era" – a phrase he applied to the civil rights unionism of immediate postwar years -- "ensured that when the civil rights struggle of the 1960s emerged it would have a different social character and a different political agenda, which in the end proved inadequate to the immense social problems that lay before it."<sup>16</sup>

This article raises questions about this new consensus regarding the importance of the Communist left in the realm of civil rights and the sources and consequences of the decline of the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition. Underlying my argument is the conviction that postwar struggles for civil rights cannot be understood fully if they are divorced from the concrete history of the Communist Party, whose members often played key roles in those struggles. Three key sets of questions are posed. The first concerns the Party's postwar character and campaigns. What did the CP's program regarding civil rights consist of and what strategy did the Party pursue to win them? How should the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition be characterized? And in what ways did changes in the Party's line shape its programs and relations with other organizations in the civil rights field? The second set of questions centers on the reasons for the demise of the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition in the late 1940s. To what extent does Cold War repression explain its downfall? What role did the Party's own actions play in the coalition's collapse? The third addresses the consequences for civil rights – in the realm of politics and ideas -- of the collapse of the Party and its

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy MacLean, Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 29-30, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis-Coleman, "From Fellow Traveler to Friendly Witness," 113.

<sup>14</sup> Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 110.

<sup>15</sup> Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," 811. Also see Gregory S. Taylor, The History of the North Carolina Communist Party (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 187.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Korstad, "Civil Rights Unionism and the Black Freedom Struggle," American Communist History 7, No. 2 (December 2008): 257.

allied organizations. Specifically, what was lost – politically and intellectually – as a consequence of the Cold War at home? Given the claims made about the serious impact that the destruction of the coalition had for the future of civil rights, it is necessary to determine the *content* of the politics – the ideas, language, and program – that the domestic Cold War ostensibly extinguished. My answers to these questions suggest that the claims of the now dominant interpretation are overdrawn.<sup>17</sup> In short, this article argues that the Communist Party’s line mattered tremendously for how the left-labor-civil rights coalition evolved; that the coalition was never as strong as its historians claim; that the Party contributed substantially to its own decline as well as to that of the coalition; and that the ideas that were extinguished were far less persuasive and unique than the new conventional wisdom maintains.

(ii)

Given the historiographical centrality of the Communist Party to postwar civil rights, an appropriate place to begin is with the character and approach of the Party in these years. To many revisionist scholars of the Party’s history,<sup>18</sup> as well as historians of the postwar CP left-labor-civil rights coalition, the post-World War II Party bears a striking resemblance to the Party of the Popular Front years of 1935 to 1939. In contrast to the Party’s murky pre-war and wartime track record – marked by its disavowal of antifascism between the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in 1939 and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and its backpedaling on civil rights and labor rights

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<sup>17</sup> For views questioning the viability of the CP-left-labor-civil rights alliance, see Adam Fairclough, Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000 (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 215-16; Steven Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” in Lawson, Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community, and the Black Freedom Struggle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 21-23; Eric Arnesen, “Reconsidering the ‘Long Civil Rights Movement,’” Historically Speaking X, No. 2 (April 2009): 31-34; Eric Arnesen, “A. Philip Randolph, Black Anticommunism, and the Race Question,” in Donna T. Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz, Rethinking U.S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756-2009 (New York: Continuum, 2010), 137-138. Also at odds with the conventional wisdom on the ultimate viability of the left are Philip Jenkins, Cold War at Home: The Red Scare in Pennsylvania, 1945-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 209; Manfred Berg, “The Ticket to Freedom”: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 139.

<sup>18</sup> Revisionist accounts, which first emerged in the 1980s, rejected the traditionalist or orthodox view of the Communist party as authoritarian, manipulative, and subordinate to the Soviet Union. Instead, revisionists insisted on the party’s grassroots character, its members’ dedicated contributions to labor and civil rights campaigns, and its occasional autonomy from Moscow. On the historiography of the Communist party, including detailed accounts of the traditionalist and revisionist approaches, see Maurice Isserman, “Three Generations: Historians View American Communism,” Labor History 26, No. 4 (1985): 517-545; John Earl Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism,” Journal of Cold War Studies 2, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 76–115; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field,” Labour History Review 68, No. 1 (April 2003): 61-78; Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, “Revising Revisionism: A New Look at American Communism,” Academic Questions 22, No. 4 (December 2009): 452-62; and Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” American Communist History 2, No. 2 (2003): 139-173. While revisionists are a distinct set of scholars addressed in this article, many scholars of the “long civil rights movement” and/or the “Opportunities Found and Lost” thesis adopt their views.

during the war -- the Popular Front era appears to revisionist scholars as an heroic one, with the Party at the forefront of the struggle for black equality, the building of trade unions, and the opposition to fascist aggression. In this view, the CP resumed that course after (and, in some accounts, during) the war. For Martha Biondi, the postwar era witnessed the flourishing of a “Negro People’s Front” or “Black Popular Front,” at least in New York City.<sup>19</sup> The CP, others emphasize, pursued “peace and freedom,”<sup>20</sup> seeking the restoration of Franklin Roosevelt’s world, one marked by American-Soviet cooperation abroad and an expanded New Deal at home. Their approach highlights the Party’s good deeds, particularly those in the realm of militant unionism and civil rights. Indeed, the Party *did* invest significant energy in progressive causes. Its members protested lynching, police brutality, and job and housing discrimination, campaigned for black political enfranchisement, and organized black workers in trade unions.<sup>21</sup>

But were the postwar years marked by a rebirth of the Popular Front? On this question the traditionalists and many revisionists disagree. What seems evident, at least according to some accounts, is the growth in the party’s size immediately after the war.<sup>22</sup> The CP’s 1946 national

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<sup>19</sup> Martha Biondi, To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Jacqueline Castledine, “Quieting the Chorus: Progressive Women’s Race and Peace Politics in Postwar New York,” 51-79 and Robbie Lieberman, “‘Another Side of the Story’: African American Intellectuals Speak Out for Peace and Freedom during the Early Cold War Years,” 17-49, in Lieberman and Lang, eds., Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement; Robbie Lieberman, The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-1963 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Not all revisionists avoid engagement with the sectarian and “ultraleft” character of the postwar party. See James R. Barrett, William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Historians offering a positive assessment of the CP and its sympathizers on the race question include Robin D. G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1950 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); Michael K. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Michael Keith Honey, Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Robert Rodgers Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Rick Halpern, Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904-54 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Roger Horowitz, “Negro and White, Unite and Fight!: A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). A critique of these assessments can be found in Eric Arnesen, “No ‘Graver Danger’: Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question” and “The Red and the Black: Reflections on the Responses to ‘No Graver Danger,’” Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas 3, No. 4 (Winter 2006): 13-52, 75-79. Also see Arnesen, “Passion and Politics: Race and the Writing of Working-Class History,” The Journal of the Historical Society 6, No. 3 (Fall 2006): 323-356.

<sup>22</sup> Even with growth, the Party’s presence in the postwar South remained small. Michael Honey reports that the Party’s southern revival in 1946 and 1947 translated into a membership in North Carolina of roughly “150 or more members,” while in Memphis, the Party was home to “perhaps a score of members” at its “high point of influence” in these years. The Party in Louisiana in the 1940s, Adam Fairclough estimates, was no more than 200, its influence “marginal.”<sup>22</sup> Honey, Southern Labor, 242; Fairclough, “Louisiana: The Civil Rights Struggles,” 149. “When World War II ended,” Gregory S. Taylor notes, “the North Carolina

recruiting campaign, led by “young, able people who labored without stint and with a remarkable élan” proved “very successful, especially in the large cities,” former Communist George Charney recalled.<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Healey shared this assessment of postwar growth. The “immediate postwar years were actually our most productive years in southern California,” she believed, with the Party recruiting new members and retaining some influence in the labor movement and in Hollywood. The “effects of the ‘grand alliance’ days had not completely worn off.. We may have been increasingly fighting with our backs to the wall, but at least we *were* fighting.”<sup>24</sup> New York, home to the nation’s largest concentration of Communists, “crackled with the political energy of a mobilized working class,” historian Joshua Freeman concludes. Home to a “vibrant political left” whose “wartime struggle against fascism gave [it] . . . unprecedented legitimacy,” the city maintained “a dense web of institutions [staffed by] engaged leftists.” Communists and their allies published multiple left-wing newspapers, “benefited from some extraordinary mass leaders,” and exercised considerable power in numerous unions and cultural institutions. New York City politics “during and after the war still had a Popular Front tinge,” literary critic Morris Dickstein recently recalled.<sup>25</sup>

That tinge faded and that influence collapsed by the end of the 1940s. “[D]iminishing public support,” the abolition of the city’s proportional representation system that worked to the

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Communist Party comprised only fifty-three members.” Taylor, [History of the North Carolina Communism Party](#), 146. Harry Haywood put the number of party members in the South in 1947 at 2,000, “higher than it had ever been.” Harry Haywood, [Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist](#) (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 555. “Alabama probably had more Communists in the 1930s than any other Southern state,” concludes John Egerton. But the “‘invisible army’ of Alabama Communists . . . could never have called itself large or powerful or even united. Its ranks thinned rapidly after 1945. By the time the reactionary forces of anticommunism were ready to smoke out all of Alabama’s subversives in the late forties and early fifties, there was no one left for them to attack.” John Egerton, [Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South](#) (1994; rpt. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 458-459.

<sup>23</sup> Charney, [A Long Journey](#), 154.

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, [Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 105. Several recent works leave the impression that the Communist Party’s civil rights grassroots activism was particularly strong or effective in Los Angeles. Both Josh Sides and Shana Bernstein argue that the CP increased its African-American membership to about ten percent in the late 1940s, a claim that rests on Healey’s autobiography. Sides, [L.A. City Limits](#), 142, 246; Bernstein, [Bridges of Reform](#), 113, 248. Although they portray the attacks on the CP and the demise of its influence as deleterious for the cause of civil rights in their recent books, the Party’s actual on-the-ground activities do not emerge clearly in their accounts. There is little evidence that “[d]uring the 1940s and early 1950s, many African Americans in the city came to view the communist Party as the most effective and expedient vehicle for civil rights activism,” as Sides suggests. P.140. Other studies of civil rights in post-war California – namely Mark Brilliant, [The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Paul T. Miller, [The Postwar Struggle for Civil Rights: African Americans in San Francisco, 1945-1975](#) (New York: Routledge, 2010) -- do not highlight the party’s role in this era.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua B. Freeman, [Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II](#) (New York: New Press, 2000), 55, 56, 58, 74, 88. Also see Joshua B. Freeman, [In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 267-317; Morris Dickstein, [Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression](#) (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 443.

Communists' electoral advantage, and labor's "civil war" undermined the once vibrant CP. Several issues stand out from Freeman's account that directly pertain to the assessment of the postwar Party. First, the CP's influence was centered in the unions it controlled and in the American Labor Party, which it dominated. Second, while that influence was never uncontested, opponents stepped up their efforts shortly after the war and succeeded in challenging and eventually ending Communist control. And third, the eclipse of CP power did not translate into the eclipse of progressive politics. While their stance toward the intensifying Cold War put Communists and anticommunists at loggerheads, in many cases their domestic agendas overlapped considerably. "Even at the height of the Cold War," Freeman concludes, "the CP-left and the liberals who loomed so large in New York anticommunism put forth similar positions on most domestic issues.... Once the networks and institutions through which the CP operated were crippled or destroyed, ideas, organizations, and people associated with it could be absorbed into a hegemonic liberalism."<sup>26</sup> This portrait suggests less a Popular Front style alliance than a running battle between progressive organizations which happened to share some goals but fundamentally – and irreconcilably – divided over others. The postwar years, then, witnessed not the *revival* of the Popular Front but the rapid *disintegration* of what little remained of it.<sup>27</sup>

The Party could still count on the support of various fellow travelers and even some liberals in the immediate postwar years – what Freeman calls the "last heyday before the political edifice of the Popular Front came crashing down."<sup>28</sup> But that support was limited and quickly evaporated. Many former allies from the Popular Front era of the Great Depression would now have nothing to do with the Party. The Moscow show trials had disillusioned some; the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Soviet invasion of Poland and Finland, as well as subsequent CP efforts to transform Popular Front organizations into vehicles to promote Soviet foreign policy goals, taught others the bitter

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<sup>26</sup> Freeman, Working-Class New York, 91-92. Although Communists and non-Communist progressives shared a domestic agenda, Freeman argues, there were differences between the two groups with implication for city politics: "More than anything else. . . the rout of the CP-left removed from New York working-class politics the element most committed to winning and wielding social power. The Communists and their allies projected a totality of political vision, far surpassing in breadth the more parochial agendas of business unionists, liberals, and even most social democrats. . . . The reds considered themselves capable of anything and everything, believing in class rule – or at least in their own rule in the name of the working class." Freeman, p. 93. In her study of civil rights activism in Los Angeles, Shana Bernstein advances the argument that anticommunist activists in the late 1940s and beyond "continued to promote a domestic equality agenda substantially similar to earlier agendas." Although they "articulated policies and agendas that in some ways *were* more moderate than their predecessors" -- in particular, they rejected "earlier critiques of U.S. foreign policy" – they "maintained much of the thrust of earlier critiques" in their "domestic equality agendas." Bernstein, Bridges of Reform, 6, 102, 139, 184.

<sup>27</sup> "What the revisionists forget," Melvyn Dubofsky once wrote, "is that the 'Popular Front' was of short duration," ending decisively in 1939. Dubofsky, "The Devil is Not in the Details: He is Stalin!" American Communist History 2, No. 2 (2003): 192. For a contrasting view of the Popular Front as a broad social movement preceding and postdating the 1935-1939 years, see Michael Denning, The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Freeman, In Transit, 267.

lesson that Communists were unreliable, insincere, and untrustworthy.<sup>29</sup> Once burned, they vowed never to repeat the mistake. Other liberals, who had not yet made a sharp break with Communists, would do so in the early postwar years. The Soviet Union's behavior in Eastern Europe and its threatening designs on Western Europe shattered whatever faith they still retained in the prospects for a continuation of the Grand Alliance.

A crucial factor inhibiting a revival of the Popular Front in the postwar years was the Party's own ideological and programmatic orientation, which shifted ground abruptly in 1945. The Soviet Union's disapproval of American Communists' vision – particularly that of their leader, Earl Browder -- appeared suddenly in an April 1945 article in the French journal Les Cahiers du communisme, a piece which bore the name of French Communist leader Jacques Duclos but, it turns out, was authored earlier by the Soviets. Browder's sins were two-fold. First, in a mistaken gesture of wartime unity, he had dissolved the Party, replacing it with a Communist Political Association. Second, and more grave, was Browder's belief in postwar class peace, an abandonment of socialism as an immediate goal, and a Europe resting on a "bourgeois democratic" foundation. A frenzy of internal Party maneuvering followed the Duclos bombshell, resulting in Browder's fall from grace and a sharp repudiation of the Party's wartime accommodationist tendency. Once purged of its "liquidationist" tendencies, the Party was reconstituted, veered left, and adopted a harsher line toward domestic class enemies and American foreign policy.<sup>30</sup> With "unbounded faith in Stalin and the Soviet Union," explained George Charney, American Communists succumbed to a "heresy-hunting mood" aimed at restoring a "disciplined, unitary world outlook" that rejected all "illusions of postwar unity."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On the disillusionment of liberals and fellow travellers and their growing hostility to the Communist Party in and after the late 1930s, see Doug Rossinow, Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 157-58, 162-66; Frank A. Warren III, Liberals and Communism: The 'Red Decade' Revisited (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1966), 163-215; William L. O'Neill, A Better World: The Great Schism: Stalinism and the American Intellectuals (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Richard H. Pells, The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Steven M. Gillon, Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism, 1947-1985 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). On the critique of the Party by anti-Stalinist leftists, see Judy Kutulas, The Long War: The Intellectual People's Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930-1940 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> On "Browderism," the Duclos article, the fall of Browder, and the CP's shift in line, see Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, The Soviet World of American Communism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 96-106; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 215-225; Edward P. Johanningsmeier, Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 293-309; Joseph R. Starobin, American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957 (1972; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 78-106. James G. Ryan offers an alternative explanation for the "very-public destruction of Browder's leadership" as a "pre-emptive strike against a larger-than-life figure" who had become "Communism's loose cannon." Ryan, "Socialist Triumph as a Family Value: Earl Browder and Soviet Espionage," American Communist History 1, No. 2 (2002): 127.

<sup>31</sup> Charney, A Long Journey, 145, 243. "Following reconstitution," Charney observed, "no latitude was permitted. The most dangerous enemy was ideological heresy, and the party was alert to the slightest hint of deviation....The polemics were sharp and even savage. In the new atmosphere a form of witch-hunting developed in defense of ideology that warped our approach to people and ideas." P. 182.

What did the postwar Party now stand for? Through their analyses of conditions at home and abroad, Party leaders and members revealed quite vocally their hopes and fears for the postwar era. Just over a year after the end of the war, for instance, Party General Secretary Eugene Dennis addressed a crowd assembled in Madison Square Garden. “American reaction,” Dennis declared, has launched “a post-war offensive against the living standards and democratic rights of the American citizens, against American labor, American Negroes, American security and peace.” What the world was witnessing was a “post-war offensive of imperial reaction.” It is “hell-bent for world domination. It drives toward fascism and war.” Red-baiting during this “growing war crisis” – note that Dennis spoke these words in September 1946, *before* the midterm congressional elections that brought Republicans to power in the 80<sup>th</sup> Congress, before the Truman Doctrine, before loyalty oaths, and before Senator McCarthy – was considerably worse than the post-World War I red scare, for it targeted “not just the Communist Party, but the CIO and the whole labor movement, American democracy and world peace.” Hard-core red baiters and “milquetoast liberals” were seeking to “divide the labor and peace movements,”<sup>32</sup> while “imperialist warmongers” were planning a Third World War as “the road to a new ‘American Century,’ to American imperialist world domination.”<sup>33</sup> The “little man in the White House,” the new Party Chairman William Z. Foster later insisted, “has big ideas – Wall Street ideas – of establishing imperialist world domination...under the fascist slogan of fighting the so-called Communist menace.”<sup>34</sup> The lesson for black communist Henry Winston was clear: “American imperialism is now engaged in an all-out offensive against the democratic liberties of the people abroad, and against the living standards and civil liberties of the people at home.”<sup>35</sup> “Almost on the very day the fascist axis surrendered,” Ben Davis reported to the Party’s national conference on the “problems of the Negro people” in September 1947, “big capital. . . opened up a well-organized offensive to halt the forward march of the Negro people and to wipe out the limited gains they had made during the Roosevelt and war periods.”<sup>36</sup>

Over time, these charges became even more pointed. The “profit-hungry minority of Wall Street banker-generals who seized the foreign policy of the U.S.A. after Roosevelt died,” the Daily Worker editorialized in March 1948, developed the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine as “a war plan. . . part of a scheme . . . to make Wall Street the dictator of Europe as preparation for World War III.” Indeed, the impending economic crisis for which Wall Street had “*no plan other than the ‘Guns not butter!’ policy of Nazi Germany*” prompted the United States to fabricate a myth of Soviet aggression as an “alibi” for its “plan to dominate the world.” The “ugly truth” was that Wall Street

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<sup>32</sup> Eugene Dennis, “Menace of Red-Baiting,” Daily Worker, September 21, 1946, p. 7; Eugene Dennis, “The Danger of American Fascism,” Daily Worker, July 22, 1947, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> “Dennis Noted Peace Possibilities,” Daily Worker, September 26, 1946, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> “Wall Street Drives Europe to Civil War, Foster Says,” Daily Worker, May 15, 1947, p. 12. Also see War Can Be Blocked, Foster Tells Rally,” Daily Worker, September 20, 1946, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Winston, “Party Tasks Among the Negro People,” Political Affairs 25, No. 4 (April 1946): 349.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin J. Davis, “Build the Negro People’s Movement,” Political Affairs 26, No. 11 (November 1947): 996.

was “speeding our nation toward fascism and war,”<sup>37</sup> which would be a “gold mine of profits” and an answer to the “approaching economic crisis.” The Truman administration wanted “to bring Hiroshima to Europe,” beginning in Italy if its voters failed to vote “according to Wall Street’s orders” and instead brought Communists to power.<sup>38</sup> Truman’s “world leadership,” the Daily Worker editorialized earlier in January 1948, “is swiftly translated into world mastery and domination” aimed at turning the U.S. “into an armed camp ruled by militarists hell-bent for a profitable war.”<sup>39</sup>

As these speeches and editorials suggest, the Party’s repudiation of Browderism involved an embrace of a new view of America’s economy, politics, and foreign policy. Programmatically, the CP promoted the continuation of “Big Three Unity” in international affairs and, on the domestic front, endorsed price and rent controls, higher wages, and an extension of the stalled New Deal. However much those goals reflected a Popular Front sensibility, the Party’s analysis and language more closely resembled its Third Period sectarianism. As the Cold War heated up, Party members deplored Truman’s growing anti-Soviet hard line and advocated on behalf of the Soviet’s foreign policy aims. Virtually every American foreign policy initiative from 1946 onward elicited scathing condemnation by the CP and its allies, while Communist initiatives (the 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia, for instance) won fulsome praise. Fearful of a growing fascist threat in the United States in which politicians and industrialists were declaring war on labor, African Americans, Jews, and civil liberties, the CP harshly attacked the very liberal forces it carefully cultivated during the short-lived pre-war Popular Front era.<sup>40</sup>

As tensions between the Communists and everyone else heated up, intemperate language became commonplace. The “mudslinging, falsehoods, deceit and other crookedness employed against Communists and our Daily Worker today,” Party member George Morris insisted in the Fall of 1946, “makes the red-baiters of old look like ‘liberals.’”<sup>41</sup> The theme of red-baiting was pronounced in the Party’s press, as correspondents and columnists roundly condemned any and all anticommunist pronouncements in harsh terms. Over the years, revisionist historians have echoed their subjects’ complaints, finding much to object to in the anticommunist pronouncements of union leaders, political liberals, and others. But red-baiting was one side of the coin; Communists gave rhetorically as good as they got, raining abuse after abuse on their critics. Advocates of Social Democracy were denounced as “handmaidens of the Trusts” while the anti-communist Association

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<sup>37</sup> Editorial, “A Fake Crisis to Alibi War,” Daily Worker, March 18, 1948, pp. 1, 9. On the Party’s newfound belief in the imminence of fascism, see Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, 454-56.

<sup>38</sup> Editorial, “Hiroshima for Italy?” Daily Worker, March 15, 1948. Also see Editorial, “Booming the War Hysteria,” Daily Worker, March 10, 1948, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Editorial: “Sucker Bait’ For War,” Daily Worker, January 8, 1948, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> For an excellent account of the CP’s postwar political perspective, see Thomas W. Devine, *The Communists, Henry Wallace, and the Progressive Party of 1948*, Continuity No. 26 (Spring 2003): 39-79.

<sup>41</sup> George Morris, “Views on Labor News: Clear Away Confusion,” Daily Worker, October 25, 1946, p. 7. “[S]cratch a red-baiter,” Morris put it earlier, “and you’ll find an anti-Semite, Negro-baiter, union-buster, anti-New Dealer and everything else in the category.” George Morris, “Views on Labor News: Dubinsky’s Buddies,” Daily Worker, October 10, 1946, p. 7.

of Catholic Trade Unionists was condemned for its “essentially clerical fascism.”<sup>42</sup> African-American leaders at odds with the Party were well represented on the list of CP targets. When the high-ranking black CIO leader Willard Townsend concluded that the Communists were “prepared to vilify and assassinate the character of any leader who refuses to cooperate with them,”<sup>43</sup> he was speaking from experience and stating the obvious. William L. Patterson, the communist head of the Civil Rights Congress, had condemned Townsend for finding “favor in the eyes of the State Department and all other reactionary agencies.” By “viciously” attacking the Communists, Townsend appealed to “those lynchers of Negroes” which “today is also the royal road to favors from fascist minded elements in industry and government.” Townsend “has not said anything that the fascist leader Goebbels did not say; he has repeated the stories of Bilbo, Rankin, Talmadge, and many other southern lynchers.” Townsend, “of course...is entitled to his opposition” to Communism, Patterson conceded in his 1947 attack. “So, too, was Hitler.”<sup>44</sup> The NAACP’s Walter White had “misled the American people in believing that court rulings can abolish race relations,” Chicago’s second ward Party chairman L.C. Fox complained in June 1946.<sup>45</sup> When A. Philip Randolph launched his campaign against segregation in the armed forces in 1948, Party leader Abner Berry responded with mockery. “He’s the goof, all militant and unafraid, who seeks a shortcut to the battle line. And he’s getting the headlines in exchange for demagoguery and fake heroics.”<sup>46</sup> Two years later, a Communist union leader in the United Public Workers of America, Ewart Guinier, denounced Randolph, Townsend, and George Weaver (of the national CIO staff) as “typical ‘Uncle Tom’s’ [sic] of the American labor movement” who had been “bought off by ‘exceptional’ privileges, by good living and flattery... Isolated from the struggle that most Negro workers have to maintain day in and day out... they learned to compromise, to appease – to give up the fight for full equality for their people.” In the process, they became “harmless to the bosses.” Afraid to “lose their crumbs from the bosses’ table, they have been forced not only to give up the militant struggle

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<sup>42</sup> George Morris, “Views on Labor News: They Love the NAM,” Daily Worker, December 24, 1946. “Instead of building bridges to possible coalition partners, the American Communist Party deliberately ‘burned its bridges in 1948,” Peter Steinberg once wrote. “The leaders of organized labor and liberalism were written out of the ‘progressive movement.’” My only addendum would be to suggest that the bridge-burning occurred several years earlier. Peter L. Steinberg, The Great “Red Menace”: United States Prosecution of American Communists, 1947-1952 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 87.

<sup>43</sup> Willard Townsend, “Civil Rights Meet Effectively Foils Commie ‘Kiss of Death,’” Chicago Defender, February 4, 1950, p. 7. On Townsend’s life and union career, see Eric Arnesen, “Willard S. Townsend: Black Workers, Civil Rights, and the Labor Movement,” in Nina Mjagkij, ed., Portraits of African American Life Since 1865 (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 147-163.

<sup>44</sup> Willard Townsend, “The Other Side: ‘Common Courtesy,’” Chicago Defender, September 20, 1947.

<sup>45</sup> “What the People Say: Communist Party Hits Columnist’s ‘Red Baiting,’” Chicago Defender, June 22, 1946.

<sup>46</sup> Abner Berry, “As We See It: The R-Revolutionary Randolph Evades the Big Fight,” Daily Worker, May 31, 1948, p. 9. Also see Steinberg, The Great “Red Menace,” 68.

for Negro equality but to become active misleaders” selling the “Negro worker a false bill of goods in order to help the bosses keep him segregated and underpaid.”<sup>47</sup>

The Korean War afforded the Party endless opportunities to disparage further those black leaders to its right. In black Party leader Ben Davis’s view, Roy Wilkins and Walter White had “dragooned” the NAACP into “recording itself in favor of Wall Street’s aggressive, unjust and gangster war against the heroic Korean people and against the brave colonial people in Asia fighting for the freedom from brutal Western imperialism.” They were guilty of “betrayal of the Negro people.”<sup>48</sup> John Pittman, the black Party journalist who earlier published in the Chicago Defender under the pseudonym of John Robert Badger, expressly singled out black leaders and organizations for attack. As the Korean War erupted, Pittman denounced the NAACP for submitting to “the openly interventionist, aggressively imperialist policy of Wall Street and Washington.”<sup>49</sup> Mary McLeod Bethune, Channing Tobias, Walter White, Lester Granger, Benjamin Mays, and A. Philip Randolph came in for rough treatment. With the exception of Mays, “these individuals have long been go-betweens through whom the billionaires who own and run the United States try to lead and control the main organizations of Negro struggle.” By not opposing Truman during the Korean War crisis in these “dreadful days of decision and destiny,” they went “hat in hand, begging for concessions.” “The whole thing boils down, therefore, to a shoddy deal whereby these six gentlemen are quite willing, in exchange for a handful of token jobs for hand-picked favorites, to barter away the liberties and lives of the Negro millions,” Pittman concluded.<sup>50</sup> Randolph, in particular, agitated Pittman. Once a stand-out socialist and trade union leader, Randolph, by 1950, Pittman charged, “toadies for the white supremacists, preaches servility to the Pullman porters, evades all struggle with the Pullman company, denounces Marxism, extols Truman, and in the name of ‘anti-Communism’ condones the barbarous bombing and strafing of a colonial people fighting for liberation.” Pittman was only warming up. “History knows no more despicable character than the turncoat, the judas, the quisling. Yet, the special tragedy of Randolph’s degeneration is that his crime is its own punishment. For here is a man with superlative gifts and high purpose whose ‘overweening ambition did o’erleap itself and fall to the other side.’ That fall constitutes A. Philip Randolph’s private hell.” For his letter to the New York Times endorsing President Truman’s aims in Korea, Randolph earned Pittman’s particular ire. The “man who wrote to the New York Times supporting U.S. imperialism’s war against Korea began his career by battling imperialism, has ended

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<sup>47</sup> Ewart Guinier, “Time is Running Out for the Uncle Toms,” March of Labor 2, No. 4 (November 1950): 14-15. Also see William Z. Foster, The Negro People in American History (1954; rpt. New York: International Publishers, 1970), 524-525.

<sup>48</sup> Davis quoted in Walter White, “Attack Disclose Walter White has a Strength He Never Suspected,” Chicago Defender, January 13, 1951.

<sup>49</sup> Pittman in Daily Worker, June 29, 1950, quoted in Walter White, “A Mr. Pittman of the Daily Worker Does Excellent Job of Distortion,” Chicago Defender, July 29, 1950.

<sup>50</sup> “Of Things to Come: Hat-in-Hand Leadership,” Daily Worker, Jan 25, 1951, in John Pittman Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.

by embracing it. He put his own ambition above the interests of the Negro people, thereby betraying both himself and them.”<sup>51</sup>

On an ideological level, the Party’s belief in the imminence of fascism and ardent advocacy of Soviet foreign policy positions put it at odds with much of American political culture and many potential allies. And some Communists knew it – or later would suggest they did. The Party had adopted “new dogmatic tactics” that “exacerbated the divisive polarization taking place,” Communist activist Peggy Dennis recalled. As a “precondition for continuing unity relations” with various groups, the Party demanded the “endorsement of the Progressive Party, denunciation of the Truman and Marshall Plan Doctrines and support to the foreign policies of the Soviet Union.” These, CPers in unions and “people’s organizations” were instructed, were to be “the main issues in their activity; coalition relations were severed when they failed.” In the effort to “obliterate” what new Party leader William Z. Foster saw as “the remnants of Browderism,” the CP adopted “sectarian policies.” The result was that “Communist relations with the Center-left democratic, liberal trends within the labor movement and the people’s organizations were destroyed.” Her husband, Party leader Gene Dennis, was uncomfortable with the new direction, Peggy Dennis insisted. He “pleaded, ‘Our Communist Party is not doomed to burrow in the dark like a blind mole.’ But that is exactly what it did.”<sup>52</sup> George Charney arrived at the same conclusion. “The unity created in the days of Roosevelt, John L. Lewis, and the New Deal could hardly survive the tensions,” he concluded. The “sectarian policies we pursued, that we imposed on our reluctant members and allies in the unions, accelerated the process of disintegration.”<sup>53</sup>

The influence that the Party exercised through alliances with liberals and other progressives in the Popular Front years of 1935 to 1939 was in shorter supply in the postwar years. It can be argued that what appears in revisionist accounts as a revitalized Popular Front was increasingly a coalition of CP front organizations or unions led by Communist militants or closet Communists.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> John Pittman, “Of Things to Come: Wall Street’s Mr. Randolph,” Daily Worker, July 13, 1950, in John Pittman Papers. Also see Benjamin A. Davis, “Build the United Negro People’s Movement,” Political Affairs XXVI, No. 11 (November 1947), 1004; Harry Haywood, Negro Liberation (1948; rpt. Chicago: Liberator Press, 1976), 21; Pittman, “Negro Workers Test Allies by Action against Jimcrow,” Workers Magazine XV, No 36 (September 3, 1950): 5.

<sup>52</sup> Peggy Dennis, The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of a Political Life, 1925-1975 (Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977), 174, 204-205. On portrayals of the postwar years as a reconstituted Popular Front, see Biondi, To Stand and Fight and Matthew J. Countryman, Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 31-32, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Charney, A Long Journey, 167. A New York Party leader, in a 1978 interview with Maurice Isserman, complained that one top official “was going after each union (in New York) as if deliberately trying to isolate the Communists and force a confrontation.” Quoted in Maurice Isserman, Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 292.

<sup>54</sup> Charney found that as the Party’s criticism of liberal groups grew sharper, its “reliance on self-inspired ‘ad hoc’ movements on peace, civil rights, progressive labor action, and other relevant issues” grew greater. “These flimsy ad hoc structures were built on a uniform pattern in which some prominent, well-meaning individual was drawn in as the chairman or public figure and a reliable party person as executive secretary.” This provided the “appearance of bustling activity but could not break down the wall of our isolation. They

For instance, the National Negro Congress, once a genuine alliance of organizations and individuals across a broad ideological spectrum, was largely reduced to committed left-wingers in the 1940s. Its postwar effort to attract liberal support met with “[c]old shoulders, stonewalls, and end-runs,” in historian Carol Anderson’s phrase. By 1947, the NNC’s national office was essentially out of money, “so short of cash” that it couldn’t even print its own posters; chapter offices in Chicago and Washington faced eviction. As Anderson notes, membership drives “were abysmal ‘failures,’ and there was a ‘severe lack of participation’ in NNC activities even by its own card-carrying members.”<sup>55</sup> In the Fall of 1946, Paul Robeson joined trade unionist and Communist Revels Cayton in a campaign to revitalize the NNC before radio audiences, community gatherings, and church and union meetings. Notwithstanding the “good will” they encountered, Cayton admitted that the “circle of followers was growing smaller.” “We didn’t have a base, we didn’t have any credentials in the black community,” he confessed.<sup>56</sup> The Communist Party’s leadership dissolved the faltering NNC in 1947, merging its remnants into the newly formed Civil Rights Congress (CRC).

The CRC never attracted broad support within black communities. The new organization, a “subsidiary” of the CP, “essentially operated as the civil rights wing of the Communist Party,” historian Josh Sides argues, rallying “left-leaning unionists into an effective community group defending the rights of working-class blacks outside of the shop.” If it did, its success was short-lived, for the CRC soon shifted its emphasis to defending those under attack by anticommunists.<sup>57</sup> Even that organization’s provocative report, “We Charge Genocide,” was “less about the needs of black people, but about those of the CP,” Carol Anderson insists. In this case, as in many others, the needs of the CP were those of the Soviet Union. CRC leader William Paterson expressed his desire that the report – which was highly damning of American race policies – would “pollute” the air with the “stink” of American crimes so that Western Europeans would reject NATO and “cry ‘Americans...go home.’”<sup>58</sup> Beyond leftist circles, the report garnered little support. In the realm of

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served only to supply the fiction in Cominform journals of popular opposition to American policy, while blinding us to the realities of the situation.” Charney, *A Long Journey*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85, 90-91; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 310-311. Also see Erik S. Gellman, “Death Blow to Jim Crow’: The National Negro Congress, 1936-1947” (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2006), 317-319; Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 213.

<sup>57</sup> Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 139; Josh Sides, “You Understand my Condition’: The Civil Rights Congress in the Los Angeles African-American Community,” *Pacific Historical Review* 67, No. 2 (May 1998): 233, 243, 253. The role of the CRC in defending one southern African American in Mississippi – and misrepresenting the facts of his case to the larger public – is addressed in a fascinating recent book by an investigative journalist. See Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee: A Tragedy of Race, Sex, and Secrets in the Jim Crow South* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010). A positive treatment of the CRC can be found in Gerald Horne, *Communist Front?: The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988).

<sup>58</sup> Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 183, 185.

labor, the Communist-led unions purged by the CIO were on their own. The National Negro Labor Council (1950-1956) may have been a “united front of progressive trade unionists, veteran left-wing organizers, ex-soldiers, and members and ‘fellow travelers’ of the Communist Party,” as Clarence Lang has claimed.<sup>59</sup> If so, it was a very small “united front,” heavy on fellow travelers and Party members and light on anyone else. The Party’s evolving approach to African Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s – with its even greater emphasis on civil rights and race issues – affected the unions still under its sway. The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) had for years been a paragon of progressive militancy marked by the call for black-white unity, at least in its Chicago stronghold if less so elsewhere. By the early 1950s, Randi Storch observes, its “shifting racial policies” made the union’s focus on interracialism suspect, drove white ethnic Communists out of leadership positions, and alienated “its historic base among white ethnic workers.”<sup>60</sup>

The postwar Communist Party found itself increasingly isolated from the mainstream liberal and progressive organizations with which it might have made common cause. Some potential allies remained distrustful of the Party because of its earlier behavior; others objected to its current ideology and political program. In the unfolding Cold War, the Party’s insistent defense of Soviet foreign policy put it on a collision course with not just the U.S. government but countless Americans, including millions of immigrants and their children, who failed to appreciate the imposition of Communist rule in Eastern Europe. And, unquestionably, the heightened anticommunism of political leaders and the press made any hope of recreating the Popular Front an uphill struggle. What made it an impossible task, however, was the Party’s attitude toward potential allies. Looking back a quarter of a century later, former party leader George Charney assessed the consequences of the CP’s postwar stances: “As a consequence of an overall approach that interpreted all issues in the light of the ‘two camps,’” he concluded, “our relationship with established groups and the community rapidly worsened. The NAACP was an agent of imperialism. We heaped virulent abuse on such personalities as A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Ralph Bunche. They had betrayed the struggle for Negro liberation...The whole framework of unity

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<sup>59</sup> Clarence Lang, “Freedom Train Derailed: The National Negro Labor Council and the Nadir of Black Radicalism,” in Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang, eds., Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: “Another Side of the Story” (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 162. Also see Gerald Horne, Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 163.

<sup>60</sup> Randi Storch, “The United Packinghouse Workers of America, Civil Rights, and the Communist Party in Chicago,” in Robert W. Cheney, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor, American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 73. Roger Horowitz, “Negro and White, United and Fight!?: A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 221. “Next to the debacle in the labor movement and in part its product, our heaviest and most grievous setback was in the Negro movement,” Charney complained. “The decline in Negro membership in the following years was perhaps the most disillusioning and heartbreaking episode of this period. The party in the years preceding the cold war had already suffered heavy losses. When I returned to the scene in 1945, it no longer resembled the powerful organization of the mid-thirties that had numbered in the thousands. It was a loose, fragmented body without a mass base.” Charney, A Long Journey, 190-191.

laboriously built over a decade narrowed to the vanishing point.”<sup>61</sup> Unlike the 1935-1939 years when the Party supported the New Deal and actively sought out liberals and Social Democrats with whom to collaborate, the post-1945 years witnessed instead the dogmatic castigation of those who deviated from the Party’s program. Communists moved “deeper and deeper into the nice little sectarian morass, where you stick to what you called ‘principles’ but were really doctrinaire rules,” the former North Carolina Communist leader Junius Scales told an oral historian. “This was the road to disaster, and it didn’t take very long.... More and more, the Left was cutting its own throat, eliminating possible allies and going it alone. And an inability to compromise, an inability to modify tactics, became what we considered ‘a principled position.’”<sup>62</sup> That a new Popular Front could not materialize was attributable, in part, to the Communists’ new program, ideological orientation, and very language, which constituted insurmountable obstacles.

Decades ago, close attention to the Communist Party’s changing line, internal Party debates, and specific programmatic initiatives occupied center stage in ardently anticommunist scholars’ briefs against the CP. That attention led them to conclude that the postwar Party was out of touch with American realities, hopelessly subordinate to the Soviet Union, disingenuous and manipulative in its practices, and a danger to American democracy.<sup>63</sup> From the 1980s onward, revisionists largely rejected that portrait.<sup>64</sup> Instead of an organization taking its marching orders from Moscow, their Party was a grassroots crusade of authentic and at times heroic American radicals who exercised a degree of independent judgment and autonomy, at least at certain moments. To their credit, the revisionists’ focus on grassroots activism has allowed them to recover from obscurity a wealth of information about forgotten or little-known protest campaigns and biographical information about individual Communists and their often sincere commitment to the struggle for black equality. But revisionists rejected not only the traditionalists’ conclusions but the issues on which those earlier

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<sup>61</sup> Charney, *A Long Journey*, 194. On the complex relationship between the CP and the NAACP, see Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism,” 75-96. Berg generally defends the NAACP from its academic critics on the left, finding its stance to be nuanced and understandable than the critics allow.

<sup>62</sup> Mickey Friedman, *A Red Family: Junius, Gladys and Barbara Scales* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 45-56. “From ’45, ’46, when Browder was dumped, to ’56, ten years’ time,” Scales concluded, “the Communist Party had largely shattered itself. Of course, it was under tremendous attack all the time, but there was almost no way the Communist Party could have better aided that attack than by this policy.” P.45.

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism: A History of the Communist Party of the United States Since 1945* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959); Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (1957; new ed. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962); Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis*; Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (1951; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1971), 292-93, 296; Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964).

<sup>64</sup> On traditionalists and revisionists in CP historiography, see Maurice Isserman, “Three Generations: Historians View American Communism,” *Labor History* 26, No. 4 (1985): 539-40; Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” *American Communist History* 2, No. 2 (2003); John Earl Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditionalist View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 76-115; John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, “The Historiography of American Communism: An Unsettled Field,” *Labour History Review* 68, No. 1 (April 2003).

writers had focused as well. Ideology – and the decisions it inspired and reactions it provoked – remain largely peripheral to the revisionist project. Although they acknowledged Browder’s ouster and the general leftward shift in ideological orientation that immediately followed, few probed deeply into the Party’s line or actual programs, highlighting instead the CP’s advocacy of peace, freedom, and civil rights and its members’ genuine commitment to building a better world. This approach, however, has not gone unchallenged. Revisionist scholars have “revealed important truths about the Party’s American roots,” Judith Stein once noted, but in their “treatments communism itself tends to disappear”; as a result, they shied “away from a serious discussion of the CP’s . . . politics,” particularly in the postwar era.<sup>65</sup> Labor historian Steve Rosswurm reminded revisionists almost two decades ago that “Classical Marxism-Leninism established the framework for the disastrous CP line in the period from 1945 to the mid-1950s,” an era marked by “sectarian attitudes” and the increasing isolation,<sup>66</sup> although few paid heed. By rejecting or downplaying the importance of intra-party debates, language, ideology, and programs as an antiquated species of red-baiting or as irrelevant to their project of reconstructing forgotten grassroots initiatives, revisionist scholars of the Party have limited their ability to comprehend the character of the postwar Party and the nature of its demise. Unlike the more reflective former Communists like Healey, Charney, and Scales, they have made it impossible to understand how the postwar words, ideas, and behavior of Communists themselves made it difficult for some non-Communists to ally with them or why other non-Communists broke with or turned on them. In too many instances, the motivations of non-Communists are reduced to fear, conservatism, or opportunism, with a static, ideologically indeterminate, but otherwise militant Communist Party playing the role of victim. Such portrayals do an injustice to the non-Communists and give a complete pass to the Party. In uncritically adopting the revisionists’ portrait of the Party, civil rights scholars too have limited their ability to assess the postwar left-labor-civil rights coalition.

### (iii)

The new conventional wisdom holds that the domestic Cold War silenced radical voices at the forefront of vital, interconnected social movements, depriving the nation of a powerful analysis that linked race, class, capitalism, and colonialism. A “great tragedy, for the black freedom movement. . . , was the silencing of radical leadership,” Robin D.G. Kelley has written. Two towering individuals figure centrally in scholars’ portrayal of the consequences of anti-communism for the

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<sup>65</sup> Judith Stein, “The Robeson Story,” *Dissent* 36, No. 4 (Fall 1989).

<sup>66</sup> Steve Rosswurm, “Introduction: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment of the CIO’s Expelled Unions,” in Steve Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 9. For similar criticisms of inattention to the politics of the Communist movement, see Geoff Eley, “International Communism in the Heyday of Stalinism,” *New Left Review* 157 (May/ June 1986): 90-100; Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (2003): 151; Arnesen, “No Graver Danger,” 38-39.

civil rights struggle: Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois. For their militant critique of American race relations and their brave advocacy of anticolonialism, revisionist scholars maintain, they incurred the federal government's wrath. Both men had their passports revoked; Du Bois was indicted – and acquitted – for failing to register as a foreign agent, and Robeson was vilified in the press by black and white commentators alike. The attacks on these men, Sugrue argues, “sent a chilling message about the risks of leftist taint.”<sup>67</sup> Scholars rightly deplore the substantial violations of civil liberties that occurred over half a century ago. But to what extent did those violations result in the suppression of radical voices and analyses or in the impoverishment of American political discourse, as the consensus view holds. What, in fact, were those voices saying? And to what extent were they silenced?

Robeson, an internationally renowned singer and stage and film actor, became enamored of the Soviet Union and drew close to American Communists in the 1930s.<sup>68</sup> Although his most important biographer (like Du Bois's) has provided a nuanced account of his political activities, Robeson appears in much recent scholarship on anticommunism and the Cold War as an almost larger-than-life crusader who won acclaim from audiences at home and abroad for his denunciations of fascism, racism, and colonialism. To see him as more than a general do-gooder or martyr, however, requires taking him seriously as a political actor which, in turn, requires a close examination of the content of his politics.

Although never formally in the Party, Robeson uncritically embraced its causes. From the Great Depression years onward, he stoutly defended the Party and justified any and all behavior, however brutal, by the USSR. Following the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, Robeson excused Stalin's invasion of Poland and Finland as a legitimate response to the Western imperialists' preparation for war against the Soviets.<sup>69</sup> Seven years later, Robeson denounced Winston Churchill's 1946 “Iron Curtin speech” as a “warmongering” distortion, “both a slander upon the Soviet union” and “an affront to the American people.”<sup>70</sup> He may have been misquoted – slightly – when it was reported he stated in Paris in 1949 that “It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.”<sup>71</sup> But subsequent statements essentially reiterated the point. His concert tour in the Soviet Union in 1949, his biographer Martin Duberman reports, coincided with an “anti-‘Zionist’ campaign,” then in “full

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<sup>67</sup>Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 57; Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 105. Sugrue's claim, in an earlier book, that “McCarthyism also silenced the most vocal critics of racial inequality” assumes that those critics *were* silenced and that they were more vocal on matters of racial inequality than other critics. See Thomas J. Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 156.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Bauml Duberman, Paul Robeson: A Biography (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 418.

<sup>69</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson: A Biography, 234-35; “I am not a Communist – Robeson; Defends Russia,” Baltimore Afro-American, December 23, 1939. Also see Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 367.

<sup>70</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson, 303.

<sup>71</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson, 342.

swing.” Robeson’s Jewish accompanist was denied a visa. “But if Robeson took that as an insult, or a portent,” Duberman reports, “he never showed it: he shrugged.” Unable to “locate Jewish friends from previous visits to Moscow” – some had mysteriously died, been found “brutally murdered” earlier, or were under arrest (a fact that he had been carefully apprised of by a friend) – Robeson “himself felt some uneasiness.” Apparently, he “never once verbalized any distress.” Although on one occasion he acknowledged the cultural ties between Jews in the United States and the Soviet Union, upon his return to the United States he “clammed up,” telling a reporter from Soviet Russia Today “that the charges of anti-Semitism being laid against Russia in the Western press failed to square with what he had himself observed.” Once again he struck up the familiar chorus that the Soviets “‘had done everything’ for their national minorities.” As Duberman explains, Robeson had “come to believe so passionately that U.S. racism and imperialism were the gravest threats to mankind, including the real possibility in 1949 that the United States would launch a pre-emptive war...that he felt public criticism of anti-Semitism in the U.S.S.R. would only serve to play into the hands of America’s dangerous right wing.” Duberman concludes: “To the end of his life he would refuse to criticize the Soviets openly” – and barely even in private.<sup>72</sup>

Robeson’s domestic and foreign policy pronouncements remained consistent with the CP line. Before a Bill of Rights Conference in New York that same year, he sharply rejected a resolution on behalf of Trotskyists convicted under the Smith Act in 1941. They were “the allies of fascism who want to destroy the new democracies of the world,” he declared. “They are the enemies of the working class,” who, like the Ku Klux Klan, deserved no civil rights.<sup>73</sup> When challenged about Stalinist show trials and purges by Congressional investigators in 1946, the world renowned performer explained that the Soviet Union had been under attack since its founding in 1917 and that dissenters, with “no faith in the potentiality of the Russian people...ought to get out of there or get shot.”<sup>74</sup> The peoples of Eastern Europe, he explained in 1949, were “masters of their

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<sup>72</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson, 352-54. Robeson’s denials of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union proved to be wholly false, providing ideological cover for a regime that had embarked on a campaign of vilification and repression of Jews through attacks on “cosmopolitanism” which, in Robert Wistrich’s words, “formally initiated a witch hunt against Jews that would last for five years and had some astonishing resemblances to the Hitlerian model,” including the branding of Jews as “parasites’ and unassimilable aliens who were allegedly eroding or denigrating Russian national culture.” See Robert S. Wistrich, A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad (New York: Random House, 2010), 129-30; 123-124; Vladislav M. Zubok, A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 7, 56-57; Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, Stalin’s Last Crime: The Plot Against Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953 (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); and David Brandenberger, “Stalin’s Last Crime? Recent Scholarship on Postwar Soviet Antisemitism and the Doctor’s Plot,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 6, No. 1 (Winter 2005 [New Series]): 187-204. In the immediate postwar era, official anti-Semitism was hardly the monopoly of the Soviet Union; Communist regimes in Eastern Europe followed suit. On the “suppression of the Jewish question” and the “purging of ‘cosmopolitans’ and a wave of government-initiated anti-Semitism” in East Germany, see Jeffrey Herf, Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 106-161. Also see Philip Mendes, “American, Australian, and other Western Jewish Communists and Soviet Anti-Semitism: Responses to the Slansky Trial and the Doctors Plot, 1952-1953,” American Communist History 10, No. 2 (August 2011):151-168.

<sup>73</sup> This was “not Robeson’s finest hour,” Duberman concludes. Duberman, Paul Robeson, 382.

<sup>74</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson, 308.

own lands.”<sup>75</sup> Shortly thereafter, he denounced “American intervention in Korea . . . [as] the culmination of a wicked and shameful policy which our government has ruthlessly pursued with respect to the colonial peoples of the world.”<sup>76</sup> As historian Mark Naison once observed, Robeson offered his audiences “a disingenuous and inaccurate portrait of an international freedom movement under Soviet leadership”; Robeson’s Soviet Union “was more a projection of his needs and fantasies than an actual country.”<sup>77</sup>

There is no question that Du Bois was an outspoken critic of domestic race relations, colonialism, and American foreign policy. In the late 1940s, Du Bois parted company with his NAACP colleagues and surrounded himself with new friends in the Communist Party orbit. Unceremoniously removed from his NAACP position in 1948, he found new institutional homes in the left-wing Council on African Affairs, the Progressive Party, the Peace Information Center, and the American Labor Party. During the Cold War, the senior statesman of civil rights uttered few critical words concerning his new shining hope for humankind, the Soviet Union. In his weekly column in the black press, “The Winds of Time,” Du Bois addressed anticommunists head on. “LOOK AT RUSSIA?” he asked. “Has she got a Free Press? No, Sir! Her press is gagged with the silly idea of abolishing Poverty, curbing the rich...”<sup>78</sup> Communism’s goals were the “Abolition of poverty,” the “wiping out of illiteracy,” the “carrying on of industry primarily for the benefit of consumers and not for private profit,” and the “total abolition of unemployment.” Free enterprise, he argued, “has well-nigh ruined civilization,” but “Russia proposes a remedy and tries it on herself.”<sup>79</sup> That nation, he elsewhere noted, was the “most hopeful country on earth.”<sup>80</sup> At the “Partisans of Peace Conference” outside Paris in April 1949, Du Bois denounced the United States as “[d]runk with power . . . leading the world to hell in a new colonialism with the same old human slavery which once ruined us; and to a Third World War which will ruin the world.”<sup>81</sup> In the early 1950s, he would

<sup>75</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson, 381.

<sup>76</sup> Robeson quoted in Murali Balaji, The Professor and the Pupil: The Politics and Friendship of W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 297. Robeson condemned America’s entrance into the conflict on behalf of “a corrupt clique of politicians south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.” Duberman, Paul Robeson, 388; Balaji, Professor and the Pupil, 285. In the pages of Freedom, a newspaper published by Robeson allies from 1950 to 1955, he and other contributors regularly denounced the war. American troops, he declared in an article in 1952, “have acted like beasts, as do all aggressive, invading, imperialistic armies.” Lawrence Lamphere, “Paul Robeson, Freedom Newspaper, and the Korean War,” in Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak, Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), 139.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Naison, “Paul Robeson and the American Labor Movement,” in Jeffrey C. Stewart, Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 183.

<sup>78</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Winds of Time: The Best Possible World,” Chicago Defender, April 26, 1947.

<sup>79</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Winds of Time: ‘Stupid and Dangerous,’” Chicago Defender, April 19, 1947.

<sup>80</sup> David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963 (New York: John Macrae Book/Henry Holt, 2000), 525.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 545. Also see “A Death Sentence for Du Bois?” New Africa 10, No. 4 (November 1951): 3-4.

denounce Truman as ranking “with Adolph Hitler as one of the greatest killers of our day.”<sup>82</sup> Biographer David Levering Lewis observes that “neither communism’s doctrinal rigidities nor the Soviet Union’s 1956 rampages in Eastern Europe would shake Du Bois’s commitment to world socialism... As a battle to the death had been joined between the two superpowers, he saw himself being compelled by the logic of his racial and economic priorities to espouse the cause of opponents of Wall Street and the Pentagon, even when such advocacy corrupted other ideals of intellectual honesty and humanism.”<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, his tribute to Joseph Stalin on the occasion of the Soviet leader’s death in 1953 left little to the imagination about where Du Bois stood in the Cold War. Published in the pages of the leftwing weekly, the National Guardian, “On Stalin” praised the “simple, calm and courageous” man who “seldom lost his poise.” Attacked and “slandered as few men of power have been,” Stalin “seldom lost his courtesy and balance.” Du Bois cast aspersions on the late Leon Trotsky, whose “magnificent lying propaganda” had been naively accepted by American liberals. Among Stalin’s great achievements was his standing up to the kulaks who “clung tenaciously to capitalism and were near wrecking the revolution.” Stalin courageously “drove out the rural bloodsuckers.” Confronting the “problem of Peace” as the Second World War drew to its close, Stalin stood down “British imperialism represented by its trained and well-fed aristocracy” as well as the “vast wealth” of the United States. He “neither cringed nor strutted... he never surrendered.” He was “reasonable and conciliatory.” On the subject of Eastern Europe, Stalin stood firm, insisting that the “Balkans were not to be left helpless before Western exploitation for the benefit of land monopoly. The workers and peasants there must have their say.” Even in death the Soviet leader was the “butt of noisy jackals and of the ill-bred men” in the West.<sup>84</sup> In nine short paragraphs, the scholar-activist whitewashed the legacy of a brutal dictator, justified mass murder, and defended Soviet domination of Eastern Europe as empowering workers and peasants. Du Bois would not change his mind. Three years later, the Khrushchev revelations of Stalin’s brutalities had little effect on the elderly civil rights figure, for he believed the West’s body count – from the Atlantic slave trade, African colonialism, and the two world wars – was higher. Communist regimes in the USSR and China feted Du Bois and his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois (equally sympathetic to the CP), offering what

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<sup>82</sup> Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 554.

<sup>83</sup> Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 556.

<sup>84</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “On Stalin,” National Guardian, March 16, 1953; reprinted in Herbert Aptheker, ed., Newspaper Columns by W.E.B. Du Bois, Vol. 2: 1945-1961 (White Plains, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1986), 910-911. These paragraphs were no exception; they resembled, Lewis observes, passages in a long manuscript that Harcourt, Brace had “rendered Du Bois’s legacy a favor by declining to publish.” Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 557. The sentiments expressed in “On Stalin” make it difficult to take seriously Eric Porter’s endorsement of the argument that “Du Bois’s refusal to condemn Stalin was often motivated by his conviction that whatever the truth in anti-Soviet rhetoric, it must be read in light of the limitations of the racial politics of the United States.” Eric Porter, The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 153.

Lewis describes as “red-carpet receptions,” and Du Bois repaid the favors, remaining an inflexible defender of the Communist bloc.<sup>85</sup>

The Cold War silenced the voices of neither Robeson nor Du Bois. It is true that political repression – as well as popular revulsion – deprived them of *some* platforms and, in the case of Robeson, an income-producing stage.<sup>86</sup> The revocation of their passports meant that foreign audiences would not hear them in person. But both men continued to speak out in the years that followed. Robeson reached interested readers through the pages of his monthly journal Freedom and found enthusiastic audiences among the shrinking circle of left-wing activists.<sup>87</sup> For his part, Du Bois wrote regularly in the radical National Guardian newspaper, producing roughly 120 articles in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>88</sup> If leftists had access to Robeson and Du Bois, anticommunism unquestionably deprived non-leftists of easy access to their analyses by limiting the venues open to the two black activists. Civil libertarian objections notwithstanding, the actual content of the analyses of Du Bois and Robeson – including beliefs in the imminence of fascism and the glories of the Soviet Union – and their sectarian tone suggest that the marginalization of these two iconic civil rights figures did not lead to any profound impoverishment of American political discourse. Indeed, one might make a case that the two figures marginalized themselves.

(iv)

The “roundup” and indictment of CP leaders in the run-up to the Smith Act trials resembled the “first step fascist governments always take before moving to destroy the democratic rights of all

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<sup>85</sup> Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 556-57, 560. For representative newspaper columns by Du Bois on Cold War, political economy, American politics, imperialism, and race, see “The Winds of Time: The Best Possible World,” Chicago Defender, April 26, 1947; “No Progress Without Peace,” National Guardian, October 4, 1950; “There Must Come a Vast Social Change in the United States,” National Guardian, July 11, 1951; “We Cry Aloud,” National Guardian, July 10, 1952; “Can This Paralyzed Nation Awake?” National Guardian, April 12, 1954, all reprinted in Aptheker, ed., Newspaper Columns by W.E.B. Du Bois, 2, pp. 713, 873-77, 882-84, 892-93, 926.

<sup>86</sup> On local opposition to Robeson’s concert and speaking plans, see W.W. Hudlin and H.B. Webber, “Robeson Ban Arouses East St. Louis,” Pittsburg Courier, November 22, 1947; “Robeson to Test Peoria Ban,” Chicago Bee, April 27, 1947; “Peekskill – and the U.S.A.,” New Africa 8, No. 9 (October 1949): 1.

<sup>87</sup> Balaji, Professor and the Pupil, 323. In Detroit, for instance, the church of the Reverend Charles A. Hill was “always open to him,” one contemporary recalled. See Angela D. Dillard, Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 190-91.

<sup>88</sup> Lawrence Lamphere, “Paul Robeson, Freedom Newspaper, and the Korean War,” in Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak, Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), 133-42; Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 541; Gerald Horne, Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 137, 152. In her 2011 study of black radical women from the 1940s to the 1960s, Dayo Gore challenges accounts that stress the wholesale demise of the CP-left in the early Cold War years. Her subjects constituted a dynamic “network of black women leftists” who “defiantly maintained communist affiliations in the midst of a politically repressive ‘red scare’ of the 1950s.” Their critiques and activism “undermine the commonly held belief that the narrowing Cold War landscape successfully contained all African Americans’ demands for equality within the frame of American liberalism.” Dayo F. Gore, Radicalism at the crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 2-7.

minority groups,” concluded Du Bois, Robeson, and several other black leaders in 1948. Unless the government was stopped, they insisted, “we Negro Americans will lose even our right to fight for our rights.”<sup>89</sup> As it turned out, the government was not stopped. The trials resulted in the conviction of top CP officers, whose behavior in and out of the courtroom won them few friends and only underscored their political marginality; the decision of key leaders to skip bail and go underground reinforced their public image as dangerous subversives.<sup>90</sup> But the prediction that the repression of Communists would be followed by the destruction of the “democratic rights of all minority groups” was not, in fact, borne out by subsequent events. While the struggle for equality by non-Communist civil rights activists was rendered more difficult by segregationist charges that *all* civil rights initiatives were communist tainted,<sup>91</sup> that struggle proceeded apace, largely *without* (or with little) communist involvement. The domestic cold war “proved devastating” to the Communist left, Peter F. Lau writes in his study of civil rights in South Carolina, but that “did not, however, signal the demise of the African American struggle for self-determination and equality and grand visions of democratic revolution” in the late 1940s and after; “[b]y no means. . .” did the CP-left’s decline “signal a retrenchment of the black civil rights insurgency. To the contrary, the postwar era looked far more like a beginning than an ending for most black South Carolinians.” In the Palmetto State, the decline of the CP-left was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of NAACP chapters, the size of their membership, and grassroots mobilization.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Duberman, Paul Robeson, 334.

<sup>90</sup> On the trials, the defense strategy, and the decision to go underground, see Michal R. Belknap, Cold War Political Justice: The Smith Act, the Communist Party, and American Civil Liberties (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977) and Scott Martelle, The Fear Within: Spies, Commies, and American Democracy on Trial (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

<sup>91</sup> “With the advent of the Cold War,” Kevin Gaines observes in an overview of recent scholarship, the “white South added anti-communist hysteria to its litany of racial and sexual epithets and taboos invoked to justify its violent defense of white supremacy.” Kevin Gaines, “The Historiography of the Struggle for Black Equality since 1945,” in Jean Christophe-Agnew and Roy Rosensweig, A Companion to Post-1945 America (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 220. “For black antiracist theory and practice, the triumph of anticommunism had significant consequences,” writes Nikhil Pal Singh. “Most immediately, the moral panic over communist infiltration was a powerful instrument emboldening white supremacy throughout the country.” Nikhil Pal Singh, Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 164. Also see Sarah Hart Brown, “Congressional Anti-Communism and the Segregationist South: From New Orleans to Atlanta, 1954-1958,” Georgia Historical Quarterly LXXX, No. 4 (Winter 1996): 745-816; Jeff Woods, Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); George Lewis, The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Jason Sokol, There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 38-39, 85-91.

<sup>92</sup> Peter F. Lau, Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality since 1865 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 172, 175. Lau puts NAACP membership in South Carolina at over 10,000 in 1945 and 14,237 in 1948. “Between 1946 and 1955,” he notes, “the number of branches in the state nearly doubled from forty-nine to eight-four. Never before had the organization established such a thorough presence in the state and never to the same extent had the organization drawn its membership and allegiance from the state’s most rural, isolated, and powerless regions.” The big drop in NAACP membership came only with the backlash in the wake of the 1954 *Brown* decision. The Progressive Democratic Party,

Perhaps historians would be correct in asserting that anticommunism “stalled and deformed the African American freedom movement during the late 1940s and early 1950s,” as Clarence Long has put it, *if* that movement had consisted largely of Party members and sympathizers or if the Party had exercised a significantly disproportionate influence on the ground.<sup>93</sup> In neither instance was this the case. The cast of characters – individual and organizational – involved in civil rights was considerably larger and broader in the late 1940s than the new consensus view would have it. As Lau argues, the “Popular Front never held a monopoly on activism dedicated to expanding the meaning and practice of American democracy.”<sup>94</sup> The immediate postwar movement was never defined or dominated, numerically or programmatically, by the CP-left.<sup>95</sup> Rather, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of postwar *movements*, for civil rights activity drew upon a broad array of institutions and individuals, many of whom were indifferent or even hostile to the CP-left.

The campaigns for the franchise in the postwar South by non-Communists illustrate the organizational breadth of civil rights activism as well as its social character. In their efforts to vote, Patricia Sullivan demonstrates in a recent study, “black southerners joined a growing postwar movement to challenge the dominance of the segregationist, anti-labor, antidemocratic Southern Democrats.” One important vehicle they used was the NAACP, an organization whose eight-fold increase, Manfred Berg notes, brought its membership to 540,000 by 1946. Those chapters, often cooperating with churches and other local bodies, tackled local voting bars with national NAACP

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independent from the NAACP but “created through NAACP networks,” claimed 45,000 members by the end of World War II.” Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 136-38, 185, 191, 210. By the decade’s end, Berg notes, the NAACP “had more than seven hundred branches and about 175,000 members in the South,” with eight out of ten “newly chartered NAACP branches ... located below the Mason-Dixon line.” See Berg, “The Ticket to Freedom,” 110, 143. On wartime and postwar civil rights activism by non-Communists, also see Michael J. Klarman, “How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis,” *Journal of American History* 81, No. 1 (June 1994): 88-19; Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 237, 239-41, 250-52; Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>93</sup> Lang, “Freedom Train Derailed,” 164.

<sup>94</sup> Lau, *Democracy Rising*, 175. On the sustained efforts of non-Communist black labor activists in this era, also see Philip F. Rubio, *There’s Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Dorothy Sue Cobble too makes the case that the CP-left had no monopoly on campaigns on behalf of black workers in the postwar era. Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 80-84.

<sup>95</sup> For examples of contributions by non-Communist activists ignored by CP revisionists and some long civil rights scholars, see Lau, *Democracy Rising*; Jennifer E. Brooks, *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Glenn Feldman, ed., *Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004); Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991); Berg, “The Ticket to Freedom”; Charles M. Payne and Adam Green, ed., *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850–1950* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). On non-Communist activism on the West Coast, see Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*.

attorneys and fieldworkers standing by to assist them. The NAACP boasted a roster of local activists whose names – then and now – stood out in the struggles for equality – Harry T. Moore of Florida, John LeFlore in Alabama, and Myrlie and Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore in Mississippi, to name a few. The indefatigable Ella Baker conducted voter education and registration conferences in Florida and Oklahoma in 1946, drawing in activists Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon, among many others.<sup>96</sup> For his part, Nixon, not only an NAACP leader but the head of his local chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded the Montgomery Voter's League in 1940, led a demonstration of 750 black Montgomery citizens to the board of registrars in 1944, filed a lawsuit against recalcitrant officials in 1945, and campaigned across Alabama organizing black voters. "Partly as a result of his efforts," Nixon's biographer John White concludes, "the number of African American voters in the state increased from 25,000 in 1940 to 600,000 in 1948."<sup>97</sup>

The NAACP at the national and local level was hardly alone in the fight. Across the South, indigenous organizations, often working in conjunction with the NAACP but at times independently, emerged to tackle the broad range of disabilities under which African Americans lived and labored. In Mississippi in 1946, a Progressive Voters League, aided by the NAACP, catalogued the abuses of African Americans attempting to register; black Mississippians then descended upon Jackson to testify before a U.S. Senate hearing into charges of corruption in the election of the staunch segregationist Theodore Bilbo. It was, sociologist Charles Payne observes, "perhaps the most significant act of public defiance from Negroes the state had seen in decades." Notwithstanding determined white opposition, the number of African Americans on Mississippi's voting rolls grew by 20,000 in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>98</sup> Black Georgians had more success. Following the war, returning black military men formed the Georgia Veterans League and spearheaded voter registration efforts in "nearly every town, city, and rural crossroads in Georgia, according to Jennifer E. Brooks, as a "weapon in storming the citadels of southern racial tradition." In 1946, these drives registered "between 135,000 and 150,000 black voters" in that state, of which between "85,000 and 100,000 . . . actually managed to vote that year."<sup>99</sup> Across the South, the number of blacks registered to vote rose, unevenly but noticeably. By 1952, Adam Fairclough notes,

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<sup>96</sup> Patricia Sullivan, Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement (New York: The New Press, 2009), 309, 293-295, 316; John Kirk, "He Founded a Movement": W. H. Flowers, the Committee on Negro Organizations and the Origins of Black Activism in Arkansas, 1940-57," in Brian Ward and Tony Badger, eds., The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 29-44.

<sup>97</sup> John White, "E.D. Nixon and the White Supremacists: Civil Rights in Montgomery," in Feldman, Before Brown, 208-209. Nixon also organized a local NAACP protest against the touring Freedom Train in 1947; he later went on, in 1955, to form the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

<sup>98</sup> Charles M. Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). 24-25; Steven F. Lawson, Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991), 24-25. Registering to vote and actually casting a ballot remained two different things, however. Payne notes that of the 17,000 or so [African Americans] on the voting rolls in 1942, "perhaps fifty-six hundred were voting." P.25.

<sup>99</sup> Brooks, Defining the Peace, 14, 32; Brooks, "Winning the Peace: Georgia Veterans and the Struggle to Define the Political Legacy of World War II," in Feldman, Before Brown, 239-244.

the figure stood at roughly a million, up from several hundred thousand just years before. In South Carolina, the Progressive Democratic Party and other groups in the 1940s challenged the white primary, salary differentials between white and black public schoolteachers, and, of course, the denial of the vote itself.<sup>100</sup>

Non-Communist activists pursued more than political rights, for the Party and its supporters possessed no monopoly on the “economic dimension” of civil rights. Through the 1950s, the NAACP worked closely with its working-class members across the nation to bring cases of employment and union discrimination before the National Labor Relations Board and the courts. The association “did not abandon economic rights and working-class issues,” Sophia Lee has recently shown. Rather, what she calls its “postwar workplace constitutionalism” aimed to “extend the state-action doctrine to reach discrimination by employers and unions.” During the “ostensibly Cold decade” of the 1950s, the NAACP pursued a “hot battle” for blacks’ workplace rights.<sup>101</sup> The association was hardly alone in its embrace of fair employment. While Communists supported the concept of fair employment and often opposed racial barriers to job access, they did not initiate most campaigns and supported them inconsistently. African-American and white liberals, Social Democrats, Christians, and Jews were adamant that equal access to jobs was essential to black progress. Accordingly, they led a multi-faceted crusade at the federal, state, and local level for what sociologist Anthony Chen calls “the Fifth Freedom” – the right to a job on a non-discriminatory basis. From “the 1940s to the 1970s,” Chen observes, “there was a vibrant campaign for job equality in the United States,” involving marches, lobbying, and legislation. That FEP advocates failed to win federal fair employment legislation, that they succeeded in some places and not others, and that the laws that did pass were often weaker than they preferred – these speak volumes about the strength of the forces arrayed against them, not their own ideological inadequacies.<sup>102</sup> It is difficult to imagine the CP and its allied organizations producing greater results. The claim that anticommunism “banish[ed] economic inequality and the plight of African Americans from the

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<sup>100</sup> Fairclough, Better Day Coming, 204. On the increase in black voter registration in the decade after World War II, also see Michael J. Klarman, From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 236-238.

<sup>101</sup> “Just when the NAACP is said [by scholars] to have forsaken workplace civil rights,” Sophia Lee demonstrates, “the organization undertook its most concerted attack on the public-private divide so as to win black workers’ constitutional right to join unions and access decent jobs.” Sophia Z. Lee, “Hotspots in a Cold War: The NAACP’s Postwar Workplace Constitutionalism, 1948–1964,” Law and History Review 26, No. 2 (Summer 2008): 327-77, quotes on 327, 331, 375.

<sup>102</sup> Anthony S. Chen, The Fifth Freedom: Jobs, Politics, and Civil Rights in the United States, 1941-1972 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5; Anthony S. Chen, “‘The Hitlerian Rule of Quotas’: Racial Conservatism and the Politics of Fair Employment Legislation in New York State, 1941-1945,” Journal of American History March 2006; Kevin Schultz, “The FEPC and the Legacy of the Labor-Based Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s,” Labor History 49, No. 1 (February 2008); James Wolfinger, “‘An Equal Opportunity to Make a Living – and a Life’: The FEPC and Postwar Black Politics,” Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas 4, No. 2 (Summer 2007): 66-67; James Wolfinger, Philadelphia Divided: Race and Politics in the City of Brotherly Love (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). At times Communist and anticommunist supporters of fair employment opposed each others’ strategies and tactics. See, for instance, Sidney Fine, “A Jewel in the Crown of All of Us’: Michigan Enacts a Fair Employment Practices Act, 1941-1955,” Michigan Historical Review 22, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 18-66.

nation's cultural discourse"<sup>103</sup> gives too much credit to Communists and short changes virtually everyone else. As a growing number of scholars have demonstrated, the demise of the Communist left hardly deprived the civil rights movement of its critical class perspectives; fair employment advocates and black trade unionists in both the CIO and the AFL kept alive the economic dimension of civil rights.<sup>104</sup>

The Communist left's version of that economic dimension – a theme probed only lightly in the new consensus view on anticommunism and civil rights -- resembled that of non-Communist progressives on some levels but differed sharply on others. In supporting trade unions, rent control, higher wages, and fair employment legislation and opposing the Taft-Hartley Act, anti-union right-to-work laws, and wage differentials between South and North,<sup>105</sup> it shared common positions with liberals, social democrats, and assorted non-communist leftists. Party members went further, endorsing jobs “for all at decent wages,” with “Government responsibility for full employment,” federal, state, and local public works programs, “[p]ublic ownership under democratic control of the utilities, munitions, power, and oil industries, mines, and the railroads,” and the “break-up of the feudal plantation system” which was the “source of the oppression of the Negro people” in the South.<sup>106</sup> While many non-Communist progressives supported full employment, few embraced nationalization or the legislative dissolution of the plantation South (however much they despised southern planters and their lock on the legislative process). The Party further distinguished itself with its advocacy of “super-seniority” for African Americans long excluded from sectors of the economy (a form of proto-affirmative action opposed by mainstream trade unionists, black and white, as well as employers and most white workers and generally a non-starter in labor-management negotiations). And the Black Belt thesis, resurrected in the postwar era, set the Party apart from virtually everyone else. That thesis defined African Americans as a “nation” and declared the “heart

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<sup>103</sup> Schrecker, “Foreword,” xiv.

<sup>104</sup> On the persistence of an economic dimension, see: William P. Jones, “The Unknown Origins of the March on Washington: Civil Rights Politics and the Black Working Class,” Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas 7, No. 3 (Fall 2010): 33-52; Kevin Schultz, “The FEPC and the Legacy of the Labor-Based Civil Rights Movement”; Wolfinger, “An Equal Opportunity to Make a Living”; Max Krochmal, “An Unmistakably Working-Class Vision: Birmingham’s Foot Soldiers and Their Civil Rights Movement,” Journal of Southern History LXXVI, No. 4 (November 2010): 923-60; Paula F. Pfeffer, A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Kevin Boyle, The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism 1945-1968 (Ithaca, 1995); Thomas F. Jackson, From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Risa Goluboff, The Lost Promise of Civil Rights (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jennifer A. Delton, Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Eric Arnesen, Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>105</sup> Ewart Guinier, “For a Grassroots FEPC,” March of Labor 3, No. 1 (February 1951): 13-15; Sam Parks, “Body Blow at Jim Crow,” March of Labor 2, No. 1 (August 1950): 11-12.

<sup>106</sup> Nat Ross, “What the South Faces Today,” Political Affairs 25, No. 3 (March 1946): 262.

of the national oppression of the Negro people in the Black Belt” to be “the land question.”<sup>107</sup> However much pro-CP historians might applaud this political wish list, absent from their consideration is the simple fact that the Party – with small and declining support – had no program – beyond slogans and resolutions -- for realistically implementing its goals. A belief in the superiority of mass action, in “protests and publicity as a tool to delegitimize the United States worldwide by laying bare the contradictions between American democratic rhetoric and undemocratic practices,” in Thomas Sugrue’s words,<sup>108</sup> may win the approval of scholars. On the ground, as the Party’s mass actions attracted decreasing numbers of participants and protests came wrapped in the Party’s signature rhetoric or code words, this proved to be hardly a strategy at all.

Behind these economic policy positions lay a class analysis that attracted few adherents beyond the Party’s ranks. Take Ben Davis’s typical reading of the postwar alignment of class forces. Addressing a CP conference on “the problems of the Negro people” in September 1947, the New York City Communist councilman bemoaned the efforts of big employers to “to build up a sizable army of unemployed to use as a club against wage standards” in the hope of inducing “suicidal competition for jobs between Negro and white workers, hoping that this will lead to ‘race riots’ that will weaken the trade unions and general Negro-white unity.” An “increase in anti-Semitism” was “accompanied by a furious attempt by pro-fascist elements to incite conflict between the Negro and Jewish people, and, on the basis of ‘white supremacy,’ to turn all minorities against the intended Negro scapegoat.” The “Wall Street-Southern Bourbon combine ruthlessly pursues the Negro people,” he insisted, using “lynch terror and violent repression” as the “main characteristic of its campaign.” The forces of reaction sought to “reduce the Negro people in the deep South to a worse state of economic serfdom in order to guarantee the super-profits that Wall Street extorts from the Southern semi-feudal landed economy.” In urban centers, the aim was much the same: Reactionaries sought to “impose disproportionate mass unemployment upon the Negro workers, aimed at straining Negro-white unity in the industrial centers; and to use the metropolitan ghettos as a source of super-profits for the banking, Big Business, and realty lords.”<sup>109</sup> Predicated upon a wholly instrumentalist view of power, Davis’ analysis assumed a self-conscious capitalist class deliberately pursuing a divide-and-conquer strategy of fostering race riots and suicidal job competition to destroy the labor movement, condemn southern blacks to an even worse serfdom, and generate super-profits from exploitation in both agriculture and industry. In subsequent decades, a new generation of left theorists would view this approach as a reductionist, crude Marxism. To a contemporary public unsympathetic to Marxism, crude or otherwise, Davis’s views

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<sup>107</sup> On the CP position on seniority, see Winston, “Party Tasks Among the Negro People,” 335; Biondi, To Stand and Fight; Record, The Negro and the Communist Party, 272-274. On the “Black Belt thesis,” see John Gates, “The South – The Nation’s Problem,” Political Affairs 27, No. 9 (September 1948): 904-05; William Z. Foster, “On the Question of Negro Self-Determination,” Political Affairs 26, No. 1 (January 1947): 54-58; Harry Haywood, “Toward a Program of Agrarian Reforms for the Black Belt,” Political Affairs 25, No. 10 (October 1946): 855-864.

<sup>108</sup> Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 103.

<sup>109</sup> Benjamin J. Davis, “Build the Negro People’s Movement,” Political Affairs 26, No. 11 (November 1947): 997, 998, 1000, 1003-1004. Also see Benjamin J. Davis, “Disunity in Guise of ‘Negro Freedom,’” Daily Worker, June 11, 1947, p. 6.

and language found little traction. However much employers might have promoted racial job competition or financially benefited from the exploitation of black labor or communities, Davis's distorted portrait of postwar conditions caricatured a far more complex reality and undermined the Party's credibility.

Not only did the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition of the 1940s act upon an economic/class agenda, the new consensus view holds, it also pursued an anti-colonial one. Historian Penny Von Eschen has argued that a "compassionate, expansive racial solidarity . . . animated" the "global democratic vision" of a "group of men and women" who challenged American power abroad. Their anticolonial critique, she maintains, was stifled by the embrace of the Cold War by mainstream civil rights leaders and by governmental repression.<sup>110</sup> As is the case with the economic agenda, few historians have scrutinized closely the content of this anticolonialism or examined the arguments and activities of its primary conduit, the Council on African Affairs (CAA). Formally independent of the CP, the CAA was dominated by those in the Party's political orbit – Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, William Alphaeus Hunton, and Max Yergan. On the positive side, it generated a steady stream of often valuable articles and speeches devoted to colonialism's overthrow. While the CAA cast light on apartheid in South Africa, and labor unrest and political repression elsewhere in Africa, its analysis and prescriptions were by no means independent ones. Rather, reflecting the politics of Robeson, Du Bois, Hunton, and Yergan (until his falling out with his comrades and political *volte face* to the right wing of the political spectrum),<sup>111</sup> its anticolonialism came dressed up in visibly pro-Soviet hues. In the protracted debate over the future of Italy's former North African colonies, for instance, it insisted that the "*Soviet Union must be given equal voice with the other major powers*" before the United Nations.<sup>112</sup> Africa, in its view, had been singled out for priority by the imperialist as an "area of capitalist expansion to stave off the bust" that would inevitably accompany the "deepening of the capitalist crisis."<sup>113</sup> The United States – "Washington and Wall Street" jointly -- had become the "New Boss in Africa," focused on the continent's "strategic raw materials" and the suppression of the "rising tide of African nationalism." As for Great Britain, that nation's imperialists "are resigned to the whole of the European continent going Communist in the not very distant future," the CAA's newsletter, New Africa, concluded in late 1948. "Such a development is regarded as constituting a

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<sup>110</sup> Von Eschen, Race Against Empire, ix.

<sup>111</sup> David Henry Anthony III, Max Yergan: Race Man, Internationalist, Cold Warrior (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Alex Lichtenstein, "Up from Redemption: A Biography of Max Yergan," Radical History Review Issue 99 (Fall 2007): 267-271.

<sup>112</sup> "Fake or Real Independence for Ex-Italian Colonies?" New Africa 8, No. 10 (November 1949): 3. To bolster the Italian Communist Party's chances of taking power electorally, the Soviets changed their stance in 1947, accepting an Italian trusteeship over its former colonies; with the victory of the Christian Democrats the following year, the Soviets "shifted to support a collective trusteeship." James H. Meriwether, Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 74-75. On the complex political maneuvering over the former Italian colonies and Robeson's equivocations, see Carol Anderson, "Rethinking Radicalism: African Americans and the Liberation Struggles in Somalia, Libya, and Eritrea, 1945-1949," Journal of the Historical Society XI, No. 4 (December 2011): 385-423.

<sup>113</sup> "Truman's Bold New Program," New Africa 8, No. 7 (July-August 1949): 3.

threat to the very existence of the empire. In the war that they are preparing, the imperialists regard Britain as too vulnerable to serve as the main base of operations against the European continent.” Africa, with its “huge reserves of manpower and material resources,” could be “eminently suitable as the main war base,” the “main base of operations against the European continent” once its deficiency in roads, railways, and communications had been rectified.<sup>114</sup> Reflecting the language peculiar to the CP-left, the CAA defined the “enemy” as “United States colonialism,” whose “blood-sucking tentacles” were spread “throughout the world.”<sup>115</sup> For all of the good it did in calling attention to colonialism and its abuses, the CAA’s vision might be described less as “compassionate” or “democratic” than as hard-nosed and partisan in an emerging Cold War that rendered the Third World a crucial ideological and political battlefield. And the organization’s demise did not spell the silencing of anticolonial discourse. Just as the CP-oriented unions and fronts were never alone in promoting an economic agenda, neither too was the CP-oriented CAA the sole voice of anticolonialism, as Carol Anderson, Jonathan Rosenberg, and others have shown.<sup>116</sup>

(v)

Long civil rights scholars’ insistence that the “collapse of civil rights unionism . . . cast a long shadow over the second half of the twentieth century” rests on an assumption about the strength and potential of the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition. In his recent overview of the black freedom struggle, Stephen Tuck summarizes the new consensus view: “[P]eacetime biracial unionism seemed more promising than ever immediately after the war. . . . In black-majority left-leaning unions, there were some startling advances at the workplace and beyond.”<sup>117</sup> Drawing on secondary works largely about left-led unions, Korstad and Lichtenstein once noted that “workplace oriented civil rights”

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<sup>114</sup> “U.S.A. – New Boss in Africa,” New Africa 7, No. 2 (November 1948): 1, 5.

<sup>115</sup> “Editorial,” New Africa 10, No. 4 (November 1951): 1.

<sup>116</sup> Jonathan Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land? World Affairs and the African American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Carol Anderson, “International Conscience, the Cold War, and Apartheid: The NAACP’s Alliance with the Reverend Michael Scott for South West Africa’s Liberation, 1946-1951,” Journal of World History 19, No. 3 (2008): 297-325; Yvette Richards, Maida Springer: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Joseph Kip Kosek, Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 202-204, 293; David L. Hostetter, Movement Matters: American Antiapartheid Activism and the Rise of Multicultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14-41; Lewis Baldwin, “Martin Luther King, Jr., a ‘Coalition of Conscience,’ and Freedom in South Africa,” in R. Drew Smith, Freedom’s Distant Shores: American Protestants and Post-Colonial Alliances with Africa (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 53-82; Michael L. Krenn, Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department 1945-1969 (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 68-80, 87. The content and contours of anticolonialism shifted over the course of the 1940s and 1950s – subjects that historians can debate fruitfully – but a commitment to African liberation found expression in a variety of organizations, from the NAACP and the American Council on Africa to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

<sup>117</sup> Stephen Tuck, We Ain’t What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 234.

movements “took root among newly organized workers in the cotton compress mills of Memphis . . . the steel mills of Pittsburgh and Birmingham. . . [and] the shipyards of Baltimore and Oakland.”<sup>118</sup> That the coalition and its left-led unions believed in “grassroots mobilization,” exhibited “militancy,” and pursued “strategies of protest and confrontation” is not in question; whether those approaches could “eliminate racism,” as some imply, is another matter.<sup>119</sup> A central issue is whether long civil rights historians are correct about the promise of left-oriented civil rights unionism in the immediate postwar years. Did workplace-oriented civil rights movements take root among newly organized workers across the country? Did the promise of militant interracial unionism flourish only to be rolled back?

There is little doubt that this movement took root in *some* places. In Winston-Salem, as Robert Korstad has carefully demonstrated, Communists helped to build and administer Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers, at least until the R.J. Reynolds company effectively deployed anticommunism (and a variety of other tactics and technological innovations) to destroy the union. During its heyday in the 1940s, the union was involved in community-level initiatives on the civil rights front. But in the South, Local 22 was generally exceptional. Outside of a few urban centers where the numbers of Communists and their allies were larger, left-wing civil rights unionism represented no dominant force and sustained no major successes. Its prospects were not promising. Rather, as Robert Zieger’s observes, these groups operated in “outposts of militant biracial unionism” which had organized “only a small number of workers, black or white.”<sup>120</sup> In Alan Draper’s words, southern labor historians have built their case for “missed opportunities” on “marginal unions” and the “significance of their examples is dwarfed by the size of the organized and unorganized work force to which they do not apply.”<sup>121</sup>

Nor, where it existed, was the civil rights unionism of the leftist labor activists one that effectively promoted the Party’s long-standing goal of “black and white, unite and fight.” Local 22 was a largely African-American union, with relatively few white members.<sup>122</sup> “[U]nions such as the

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<sup>118</sup> Korstad and Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost,” 788; also see Korstad, “Civil Rights Unionism,” 256.

<sup>119</sup> Lewis-Coleman, “From Fellow Traveler to Friendly Witness,” 113; Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 110.

<sup>120</sup> Robert H. Zieger, For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 157, 162.

<sup>121</sup> Alan Draper, Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968 (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1994), 10-11. Draper puts FTA, the Mine Mill, and Smelter Workers Union, and the National Maritime Union in the category of marginal unions. Also see Adam Fairclough, “Louisiana: The Civil Rights Struggle, 1940-1955,” in Feldman, ed., Before Brown, 149-150.

<sup>122</sup> By 1947, the union attempted to change that with an “intensive campaign among the white workers.” FTA business agent Jack Frye reported that he had put on the “best organizing campaign . . . in my life.” In the end, Korstad observes, “the drive could never attract the white workers who could be the nucleus of a volunteer organizing committee.” This “failure to bring in more whites” weakened the union’s position with management and “exacerbated tensions” with Local 22’s leadership. It didn’t help matters any when one Party member unilaterally decided that a union policy of temporarily keeping the names of white union members secret until sufficient support had been established constituted white chauvinism. Violating union organizers’ understanding with those white workers, she made their names public. The result? Management dispersed those workers “all over the plant.” “With that kind of thing going on,” a white union official

FTA,” Zieger concludes, “were not so much interracial as black dominated.”<sup>123</sup> A similar conclusion could be drawn about the United Packinghouse Workers of America in Chicago and Fort Worth, which became increasingly black and Latino by the early 1950s when its civil rights initiatives – and Party policies – drove out its white members.<sup>124</sup> In Schenectady, Communists undermined their own United Electrical Workers’ local in the early 1950s in part by insisting that it become “more race-conscious,” leading to a “metamorphosis” that “reflected and intensified the erosion of its ties to white blue-collar workers.”<sup>125</sup> That *some* left-led unions and individual Communists pursued civil rights on and off the shop floor is not in question. Their power and influence on issues of racial equality, however, should not be overstated.<sup>126</sup>

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concluded, “it was really difficult to get anything accomplished as far as the white workers were concerned.”) Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism, 346, 354-46. Acknowledging that the FTA’s “emphasis on race sometimes got in the way of good trade-union practice,” Korstad, in an earlier essay, noted that “the party’s campaign against white chauvinism in the late 1940s diverted time and resources away from fighting the real enemy of black workers.” Robert Korstad, “The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism: Context Matters,” International Labor and Working-Class History, No. 44 (Fall 1993): 43. Junius Scales also reflected critically on the negative affect of the party’s racial policies on Local 22’s fate in the late 1940s. Out-of-town party leaders would “come down... and fan sectarian feeling,” he recalled, by adopting an “extreme line on white workers” while offering them insufficient support. The result? “Any chance at black-white unity was pretty much shot.” Local 22’s Communists also attacked the NAACP. In the face of Reynolds’ red-baiting of the union, the party “did just about everything to aid them,” he continued, by passing resolutions of support on various international – read pro-Soviet – causes. “Finally, you had a whittled down union standing in splendid isolation – isolated from the rest of the trade-union movement in the state and isolated in its own community.” Scales quoted in Friedman, A Red Family, 55-56. Judith Stein has raised provocative questions about the accomplishments of Local 22. “It is not clear how potent the union was, even in the Reynolds plants where blacks were a majority,” she writes. “Enthusiasm is not necessarily effectiveness.” Judith Stein, “The Ins and Outs of the CIO,” International Labor and Working-Class History, No. 44 (Fall 1993): 62.

<sup>123</sup> Zieger, For Jobs and Freedom, 162.

<sup>124</sup> Roger Horowitz observes that a contemporary investigation by researcher John Hope II of Fisk University found “alarming signs of racial prejudice and segregation” among white members. “More than 30 percent of white members objected to working with a black in the same job classification, and 90 percent of southern whites supported segregated eating facilities.” Horowitz, “Black and White, Unite and Fight!” p. 221.

<sup>125</sup> Rick Halpern, “Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth’s Packinghouse Workers, 1937-1954,” in Robert Zieger, ed., Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 159-82, especially 174-75; Rick Halpern, Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904-54 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 243-244; Gerald Zahavi, “Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954,” Journal of American History 83, No.2 (September 1996): 515-16.

<sup>126</sup> In arguing that the “political agenda” of the post-1955 movement eventually “proved inadequate to the immense social problems that lay before it,” scholars are placing an immense – and unfair -- burden on a civil rights movement that ultimately did succeed in toppling legalized Jim Crow and disfranchisement in the United States. (Ending both segregation and disfranchisement, it should be added, were high on the agenda of the 1940s CP-labor-civil rights movement; it accomplished neither goal). The laudable if presently utopian goals of ending “racial capitalism” and, presumably, inequality and poverty, would have required an economic revolution that the “social vision of the 1940s” – or at least its CP-variant – hardly equipped the new activists to pull off. A case can be made that subsequent activists gained much by rejecting the mechanistic theory, stilted language, foreign allegiances, factionalism, and sectarianism of their Communist predecessor. Korstad, “Civil Rights Unionism,” 257-258.

To what extent does Cold War era repression explain the demise of the 1940s CP left-labor-civil rights coalition? There is little question that repression and harassment took their toll on the party. Decades ago, Stanley Kutler described the Cold War years as “grim, bleak times for American liberty,” marked by “repression unprecedented in scale, intensity, and duration” against the Left. David Caute memorably noted that the “government took a sledgehammer to squash a gnat” in a chapter he titled “The Communist Party Goes Under” in his The Great Fear.<sup>127</sup> In more recent years, scholars have restated this argument forcefully. The “Party’s catastrophic decline can be understood only in the context of government and employer repression in the decade following World War II,” James Barrett contends, a time “when the Party itself was virtually proscribed, its programs and activities suppressed, and its leadership harassed and imprisoned.” In Ellen Schrecker’s classic formulation, “McCarthyism destroyed the left. It wiped out the Communist movement.”<sup>128</sup> Philip Jenkins concurs: “The most direct achievement of the anti-Communist movement,” he observes in his case study of anticommunism in Pennsylvania, “was the removal of the Communist Party as a significant voice in American politics.”<sup>129</sup> Extending the argument to the realm of civil rights, Glenda Gilmore agrees: By 1948, she contends, “a wave of anti-Communism had threatened to submerge the high tide of civil rights and diverted the power of the Left to implement desegregation.” “Cold War conservative domestic forces,” she concludes, “destroyed the southern Popular Front coalition, along with the groundwork that it had laid for civil rights.”<sup>130</sup>

Conventional wisdom rightly identifies the domestic Cold War as a fundamental source of the Party’s – and the coalition’s -- demise. It is hard to dispute the effectiveness of the tactics pursued by government officials: Surveillance of suspected Communists, infiltration of the party, loyal investigations and the dismissal of significant numbers of government employees, demonization in the press, high profile congressional hearings, and passage of state-level anti-sedition laws put the party on the ideological and legal defensive, while selective prosecutions under the 1940 Smith Act in the late 1940s and early 1950s, resulting in the conviction of some ninety-three leading Communists, decimated the party’s leadership ranks. Simultaneously, revelations of Communist infiltration of government agencies and involvement in espionage, especially concerning atomic secrets, cast the party in the worst possible light with an increasingly anxious public, whose support for the government’s increasing repression was the logical outcome. Nothing in these pages should be construed to suggest that McCarthyism and the broader anticommunism of which it was a part did not have toxic effects on the CP left.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Stanley I. Kutler, The American Inquisition: Justice and Injustice in the Cold War (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 243; David Caute, The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 187.

<sup>128</sup> Barrett, William Z. Foster, 227; Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes, 369.

<sup>129</sup> Philip Jenkins, Cold War at Home: The Red Scare in Pennsylvania, 1945-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 209.

<sup>130</sup> Gilmore, Defying Dixie, 412, 417.

<sup>131</sup> On the role of the FBI in investigating and persecuting American communists, see Richard Gid Powers, Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover (New York: Free Press, 1987), 228-311.

Revisionists at times also acknowledge the Party's contribution to its own problems in the postwar years. Secrecy, lying, and perjury, Schrecker once aptly observed, rendered Communists vulnerable to anticommunist charges. "In some cases," Sugrue observes, "Communist activists did not help their cause, because of their penchant for secrecy and their ideological rigidity."<sup>132</sup> But Communist's' culpability for their own troubles – including their ideology, program, and behavior after the war -- have seldom been accorded the same level of scrutiny as anticommunist repression in the new scholarship. Occasionally, the Party's postwar orientation and modus vivendi appear as enabling factors, not causal ones, in accounts of the organization's decline; in other instances, they factor hardly at all in the analysis.

The Party portrayed by the new scholars of civil rights would hardly be recognizable to Communists, former Communists, and other Americans at the time. Years after the fact, former Communist Joseph Starobin described the post-1948 Party in trenchant terms that find no counterpart in most modern revisionist accounts. "Punch-drunk but determined to stay its course," he evocatively noted, "the movement gave every sign of incoherence, of suppressed inner conflict, and of a capacity for hallucinatory political adventures."<sup>133</sup> That portrayal, widely shared by contemporary critics of the Party, traditionalist scholars of the Party, and subsequently many veterans of the CP, suggests a level of self-destructive behavior that, however hyperbolically phrased, is neither incidental nor irrelevant in accounting for the Party's woes.

The issue of inner conflict raised by Starobin and other former Communists is a case in point. At the same time as anticommunists in the Truman and Eisenhower administrations were selectively prosecuting Party leaders and otherwise making life politically difficult for the rank and file, the Party turned inward and turned on its own. In an effort to enforce a new orthodoxy, Party leaders undertook their own purges of those accused of right or left deviationism. As Barrett notes, between "the fall of 1946 and the fall of 1948, the Party expelled several thousand members, some of whom were old and trusted comrades."<sup>134</sup> In Edward P. Johanningsmeier's formulation, "'trials' of deviating members were held that mirrored the grotesqueries of the government prosecutions."<sup>135</sup> Beginning in 1948 the internal purges also forced out an unknown number of gays and lesbians, as well as members seeing a psychiatrist.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 106. Also see Barrett, William Z. Foster, 227, 237, 240-42.

<sup>133</sup> Joseph R. Starobin, American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957 (1972; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 195.

<sup>134</sup> Barrett, William Z. Foster, 242. More recently, Barrett revised those figures, suggesting that "hundreds of people were driven out of the movement" between the late 1920s and 1940s. Barrett, "Was the Personal Political? Reading the Autobiography of American Communism," International Review of Social History 53 (2008): 421. Also see "William Dunne Expelled from Communist Party," Daily Worker, September 27, 1946, p.4; "National Board Statement on CP Expulsions," Daily Worker, September 30, 1946, p.6; "Vern Smith Expelled from Communist Party," Daily Worker, September 20, 1946, p.9.

<sup>135</sup> Johanningsmeier, Forging American Communism, 328.

<sup>136</sup> Healey and Isserman, Dorothy Healey Remembers, 129-30; Charney, A Long Journey (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 207; Albert Vetere Lannon, Second String Red: The Life of Al Lannon, American Communist (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 122.

The white chauvinism campaign forced out even more. Lasting from 1949 to 1953, the campaign constituted a kind of ideological purification process rendering individual communists vulnerable to accusation, abuse, and expulsion. Overseen by Pettis Perry, the secretary of the Party's Negro Commission, the campaign involved a "vigorous struggle to root out every manifestation of open or concealed white chauvinism" in Communists' ranks. Or, as Eugene Dennis put it, it aimed "to burn out the infamy of white chauvinism."<sup>137</sup> It was also, for many, a form of power politics in which grudges and resentments, wrapped in the guise of ideology, justified attacks on competitors. West Coast Communist Dorothy Healey recalled in her memoir that the "great irony of the McCarthy period is that we did almost as much damage to ourselves, in the name of purifying our ranks, as Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover and all the other witch-hunters combined were able to do. One of the most catastrophically stupid things we ever did was to choose this moment to launch an internal campaign against white chauvinism.... [W]ith the white chauvinism campaign... what had been a legitimate concern [about racial dynamics within the Party] turned into an obsession, a ritual act of self-purification that did nothing to strengthen the Party in its fight against racism and was the ostensible purpose of the whole campaign."<sup>138</sup> Across the country, the North Carolina communist Junius Scales would have concurred. "In that time of increasing governmental and public repression," he recalled, "the Party began its own hunt for heresy and unorthodoxy," pursuing left-over Browderites and newly imagined Titoists. "By far," though, "the most significant of the inner-Party heresy hunts was the campaign against white chauvinism," which "persisted with absurdity piled on craziness until few whites dared criticize Negro comrades for the grossest errors. Ultimately, irreparable damage was done to the trust and warmth which had previously existed between comrades." In sum, he concluded, "while congressional committees were making unemployed outcasts and pariahs of thousands of Communists and sympathizers, the Party was intimidating its members with its own brand of McCarthyism."<sup>139</sup> To former party member George Charney, the white chauvinism campaign constituted "the most harrowing experience in our postwar history," resulting in "widespread removals and expulsions." Assuming "some of the features of the Inquisition," it involved raking those accused "over the coals on some vague charges in a series of dismal sessions that lasted for weeks." The "whole life of the party was taken up with endless squabbles and feudings," he remembered. "We had lost all bearings, all sight of the real

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<sup>137</sup> Quotes in Shannon, The Decline of American Communism, 66; 244-47. Also see Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., "Summary Remarks on the Discussion of the Resolution on Negro Rights," Political Affairs 26, No. 1 (January 1947): 59, 61. On the Party's definition of "white chauvinism" and its campaign against it, see John Gates, "The South – The Nation's Problem," Political Affairs 27, No. 9 (September 1948): 904-05; Winston, "Party Tasks," 355-56.

<sup>138</sup> Healey and Isserman, Dorothy Healey Remembers, 125-126. Also see Shannon, Decline of American Communism, 242-43; Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Rob Ruck, Steve Nelson: American Radical (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), p. 291; Johanningsmeier, Forging American Communism, 328; Helen C. Camp, Iron in Her Soul: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the American Left (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995), 204.

<sup>139</sup> Scales and Nickson, Cause at Heart, 209-210.

racist enemies in American society.... We had indeed come to a dead end. The goals, the achievements, the bonds that had inspired us in the thirties were no longer real.”<sup>140</sup>

What impact did the internal purges have on those expelled and those who remained? To what extent did the white chauvinism campaign affect the party’s civil rights program? Although Charney believed that the campaign “caused a revulsion in Negro circles hitherto sympathetic to the party,” we know remarkably little about the campaign and its impact. Although the white chauvinism campaign was “one of the most interesting and damaging Party purges,” in Barrett’s words,<sup>141</sup> few recent scholars have pursued the insights of Healey, Scales, and Charney. Despite revisionists’ emphasis on the Party’s grassroots -- and their call for greater attention to “the social history of Communist activists in the nation’s streets and workplaces” and “what the movement meant to millions of people around the world,”<sup>142</sup> they have been selective about the subjects they deem worthy of investigation. To date, the Party’s internal purges remain largely unexamined.<sup>143</sup>

The Party’s language, analysis, behavior, and policies constituted visible and powerful barriers keeping some potential allies from making common cause and prompting others to look the

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<sup>140</sup> Charney, A Long Journey, 195.

<sup>141</sup> Charney, A Long Journey, 195; Barrett, William Z. Foster, 243. “This fight against white chauvinism has often been regarded as simply a struggle for power and influence in a disintegrating social movement, another symptom of the disease of sectarianism plaguing the Party in the decade after the war,” Barrett argues. “The charge *was* used in this way within the Party, but it was more than a factional tool. Situated in the history of African American thought and the Party’s own long-term fight against racism, the campaign appears a bit less peculiar. . . [I]t is important to distinguish the positive features from its destructive ones.” Barrett, William Z. Foster, p. 243. No scholar has yet managed to identify the “positive features” of these campaigns. There is also little evidence to support Michael Honey’s claim that although the white chauvinism campaign alienated whites, it -- and an “increasing emphasis on civil rights” -- “strengthened the party among blacks. See Honey, Southern Labor, 242.

In her oral history and exploration of the meaning of the party in its participants’ lives thirty-five years ago, Vivian Gornick – herself a child of the Old Left -- offered a view at odds with that of Barrett and Honey: The “American CP became an Orwellian caricature of itself, disintegrating itself from within even as it was being destroyed from without. ‘White chauvinism’ (‘racism’ was not the term then in use) became the characteristic charge upon which this free-floating anxiety fixed itself; thousands of Communists were charged, tried, and expelled for being white chauvinists. The ‘evidence’ upon which most of these charges rested was painfully ridiculous, indicative of the kind of mad suspension of reason that then prevailed. A kind of Swiftian upside-downness overtook the best people in the CP: the small became big, the Yahoos were in charge, the babbling abstractions filled the tribunals.... And once the stigma of suspicion fell on you, you were lost; suspicion had become the market of Cain. ...” Vivian Gornick, The Romance of American Communism (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 170.

<sup>142</sup> James R. Barrett, “Rethinking the Popular Front,” Rethinking Marxism 21, No. 4 (October 2009): 537.

<sup>143</sup> Barrett suggests that the Party “probably lost thousands of members nationally.” Barrett, William Z. Foster, 244. Only scholar – Gerald Zahavi – has written in some depth about the white chauvinism campaign. See Zahavi, “Passionate Commitments” and Zahavi, “The ‘Trial’ of Lee Benson: Communism, White Chauvinism, and the Foundations of the ‘New Political History’ in the United States,” History and Theory 42, No. 3 (October 2003): 332-362. Scott Kurashige mentions that “purges of ‘white chauvinists’ and ‘homosexuals’...[drove] membership down” in Los Angeles, but does not explore their implications or the response of the membership. Kurashige, Shifting Grounds of Race, 211.

other way from, or even applaud, the repression directed against it. The “social vision”<sup>144</sup> of this not-so-broad alliance proved problematic in ways the new consensus has not recognized. Even if one doesn’t accept Starobin’s charge of “hallucinatory political adventures,”<sup>145</sup> it is not hard to imagine non-communists viewing the Party’s all-out embrace of Stalin’s foreign policy, the CP’s belief in the imminence of American fascism, and the disappearance of top CP leaders going underground as distinctly odd, unappealing, or even frightening.<sup>146</sup> By largely erasing the Party’s internal life and ideological stances from their portraits, CP revisionists and long civil rights scholars offer up a version of the Communist Party that would have been unfamiliar to most politically active Americans – on the right and left – in the 1940s. That erasure makes it easier to celebrate the coalition’s social vision but harder to understand how and why it failed. Along with repression, Communists and their allies played a significant, even leading role in their own demise.

Had anticommunism and the Party’s missteps not resulted in – or at least significantly contributed to -- the coalition’s demise, could left-wing activists have won significant success in the realm of civil rights? The new conventional wisdom insists that the coalition was a vibrant one with real possibilities for achieving its goals and that anticommunism chilled the political environment and destroyed both the Communist left and those in its broader orbit. This article has suggested an alternative answer: The opportunities were always narrower than they have been portrayed and, with or without anticommunism, their prospects for success dimmer. The ideas advanced by the CP left – including its particular version of the connection between economic and racial oppression and hostility to colonialism – never achieved widespread acceptance. This was in part because the Cold War at home rendered those ideas less acceptable; it was also because of the linguistic and ideological baggage that accompanied them. For their part, non-communist and anticommunist liberals, trade unionists, and civil rights activists kept the linkage between race and economics alive and offered their own critiques of colonialism. Not surprisingly, their approaches differed – sometimes sharply -- from those of the Communist left. But historians committed to the notion of a vibrant CP left-labor-civil rights coalition have been too quick to dismiss their critiques and their efforts. Assessing the nature and viability of the CP left-labor-civil rights coalition requires coming to grips with both the Party -- its ideologies, language, practices, and programs – and those civil rights activists who opposed it. It also requires scholars of the long civil rights movement to move beyond what Nelson Lichtenstein has recently called “ideologically tinged sentiments that offer up

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<sup>144</sup> Korstad, “Civil Rights Unionism,” 258.

<sup>145</sup> Starobin, American Communism in Crisis, 195.

<sup>146</sup> Contemporary charges of espionage against individual communists or individuals working on behalf of the Soviet Union also contributed to a climate of fear and intensified anticommunism. The literature on Communism and espionage is significant and growing. See Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, The Secret World of American Communism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Alexander Vassiliev, Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); James G. Ryan, “Socialist Triumph as a Family Value: Earl Browder and Soviet Espionage,” American Communist History 1, No. 2 (2002): 125-142; Allen M. Hornblum, The Invisible Harry Gold: The Man Who Gave the Soviets the Atom Bomb (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). On the party’s efforts to dismiss claims of spying, see Editorial: “Spy Scares and Unions,” Daily Worker, July 2, 1947, p.7; Editorial: “Another Spy Scare,” Daily Worker, August 16, 1947, p.7.

little more than a kind of left-wing wistfulness that history had moved in another direction.”<sup>147</sup> Without that wistfulness, we will be able to assess more accurately what anticommunism and the demise of the Communist left meant – and did not mean -- for civil rights in America.

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<sup>147</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, “Recasting the Movement and Reframing the Law in Risa Goluboff’s *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 35, No. 1 (Winter 2010): 248. Also see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 228.